THE STORY OF MY LIFE

Enid Blyton

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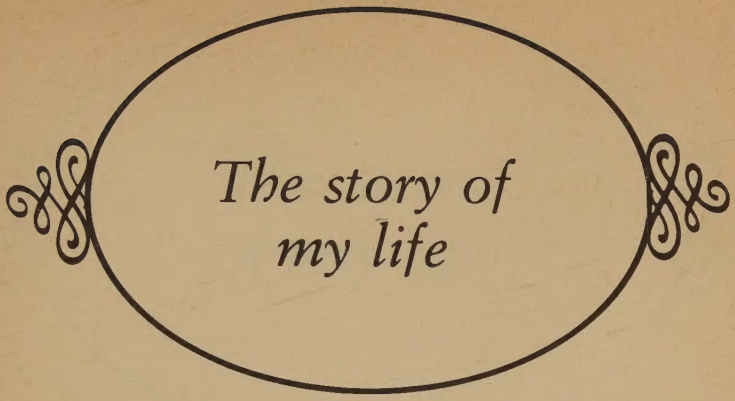
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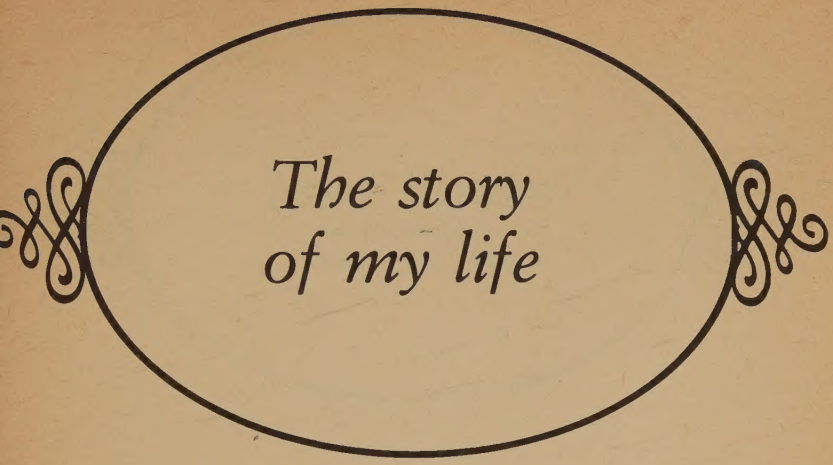

by

Enid Blyton

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Enid Blyton

by her daughter
Imogen Smallwood

Without doubt Enid Blyton is the world's best known author of children's books. Still today, as during her busy lifetime, many children write to her to ask about her life, her family and her books.

One day, at a signing session, she met an enterprising boy who had drawn up a list of questions he wanted her to answer. He could, he said, write a book about her if she would just answer these questions. This gave Enid Blyton the idea to write *The Story of My Life*, an account which will be as much welcomed by her present day readers as it was when it was first published. Of course, things have changed. Green Hedges, the family home in Bucks for 30 years, has sadly been demolished, but it is still interesting to read about it in the author's own words and to picture her there in the garden which she so loved.

Enid Blyton was born in 1897 at Dulwich, South

London. She went to school at St Christopher's School for Girls in Beckenham. From there she went to college to study to be a teacher. She taught children who will now be grown up with children or even grandchildren of their own and, as you may imagine, her favourite lesson was storytime.

In 1924 she married Hugh Pollock and they had two daughters, Gillian and Imogen. Although both Gillian and Imogen are grown up now and married themselves, they still remember how their mother wrote so many stories, with her typewriter on her knee, in the garden in summertime and by the fire in winter. She was married again in 1943 to Kenneth Darrell Waters, a surgeon. He died in 1967.

Enid Blyton always loved to meet children. She attended many signing sessions at bookshops and read to groups of children as often as she could. She dressed for these occasions as carefully as she would for any adult party.

As well as writing stories and meeting children, much of her time was taken up in answering the many letters which poured daily through her letter box from all over the world. This to her was not a real task but a pleasure because she loved to be in touch with her young readers. Another job which took up much of her time was reading the proofs of her books when her publishers sent them to her – just to make sure there were no mistakes in the printing! Sometimes her family helped too.

All her life Enid Blyton was busy writing for the children she loved; for the children of her time, of the present time

and of the future – all of whom so love her books that they will keep the author alive forever!

1

My home, Green Hedges

If you came to tea with me, you would soon see where I live and what my home is like. You would walk down the country road, looking for my house. Before you got there, you would probably say: 'That must be Green Hedges, Enid Blyton's house, because look – there's a black cocker spaniel sitting at the front gate!'

You would be right. You would soon see the little white name-post with 'Green Hedges' on it, and you would pat the spaniel, and let him take you in at one of the gates.

He would take you right up the drive to the front door. Over it is a great timber beam, and if you look up at it, you will see some Latin words carved there: *PAX HUIC DOMUI*. They mean 'Peace be to this house'. Those words were carved on the beam long before I came to Green Hedges, but I liked them so much that I left them there. All

homes should be happy, peaceful places, especially where there are children.

Cherry-blossom time is the loveliest time to visit my country town, because ours is a cherry-growing district, and there are hundreds upon hundreds of cherry trees gleaming like snow when they are in blossom.

If you peeped in at my gate then, you would see a big cherry tree overshadowing my front garden, and when the wind blew, you would be covered by thousands of white petals flying down the drive like snow. At the front door, climbing up the wall you would see another cherry tree, and I would show you where the shy little fly-catcher built his nest last year, tucked behind the blossom.

When the cherries are ripe in the orchards, thousands of birds fly down to feast on them. Then the cherry-growers are afraid of losing their fruit, and they fix mechanical bird-scarers in the trees that go off with a bang to frighten the birds away. But all that happens usually is that they fly up in a cloud and then immediately fly down again to their feast! How the birds love it!

I don't grow my cherries to sell, as the cherry-growers do, so I don't mind the birds coming to have some. 'Sing to me in the spring, and you can take my cherries in the summer,' I say. And they always leave me plenty.

When children come to visit me they always want to see two things in my house. They want to see the room where I keep all the books I have ever written, and they want to see my daughters' old nursery. They have it for a sitting-room now but, like all growing girls and boys, they hate parting with the things they loved as young children.

So you would still see the old rocking-horse without a tail (we took the tail away because we once had a cat who pulled it out every night!) and you would find that it rocks as well as ever.

You would still see the dolls' houses, full of tiny dolls and furniture, and a big dolls' cot full of dolls that simply *can't* be given away. I could tell you their names – Rosebud, Angela, Josephine and the rest.

You would see the old cuddlesome animals still sitting on the window-sill, looking out of the window as they always did. Do yours do that? My children always used to think that their dolls and animals liked to see out of the window!

You would perhaps even see Amelia Jane, the big naughty doll that I have written so many tales about. She was given to Gillian, my elder daughter, when she was about two years old. How we all loved her!

I would take you to see the big bookcase in which I have put all the books I have written. One hundred, two hundred – getting on for three hundred! I am always amused when I watch you opening the big glass doors of the bookcase, looking up and down the shelves. 'Oh, I've read that one! Oh, and I've read *all* that series! Oh, what's this book? I haven't read this one. What's it about?'

And if I'm not careful you sit down in a corner and begin to read it!

Another thing you always want to see is my garden. Well, it's a big one, with plenty of interesting things in it, so I'll put that into another chapter. Let's hope it's not raining, then you can see all round it!

2

The garden at Green Hedges

We all love gardens, especially if we are allowed to work in the garden ourselves. A garden doesn't really belong to us unless we put some hard work into it – weed and sow and water – put in plants that we can watch growing, have a little rose-tree of our own, or grow our own lettuces to eat for tea.

All my life I have loved a garden. It is said that one of the most characteristic things about the British people is their love of a garden, no matter how tiny, and we are supposed to have the loveliest gardens in the world, small or large. I know I have sometimes thought when looking at a little cottage garden in the spring, that surely there couldn't be anything lovelier anywhere than the cottager's show of big polyanthus, wall-flowers in their russet velvet, double-daisies and dancing daffodils.

When I first came to Green Hedges I wondered what to

call it. I thought I would let the children name it for me, the children who read and loved my books then.

So, in one of the weekly letters that I wrote in a paper called *The Teachers' World*, I told the children all about the house and garden. Teachers read the letter to their children, and every child listened and began trying to think of a name for my house.

I told them about the garden, mostly – how it spread out all round the house, so that there was garden in front and at the sides and at the back. I told them about the line of tall fir trees down one side, the fruit orchard, the hazel-nut copse, the curious old-fashioned trees, the masses of rambler-roses – and I told them, too, how the garden was divided up into little secret patches, each surrounded by a different kind of hedge – hazel, laurel, yew, fir, rhododendron, honeysuckle – all sorts of hedges had been planted here and there in the garden, enclosing little lawns or groups of flower-beds.

And when the children sent me hundreds of letters suggesting names for my house, about three-quarters of them had hit on the same name – GREEN HEDGES!

'You say your garden is split up into lots of tiny *little* gardens, each surrounded by some kind of hedge,' wrote one child. 'Well, our class all think you should call it Green Hedges!' So Green Hedges it was, named for me by hundreds of school children in their letters. I couldn't help thinking it was a very good name.

Now what is my garden like? What has it got that children love? Well, it has two ponds, and all children love ponds. One is a little round pond, and one is much bigger

and paved all round, with clumps of water-lilies growing in it and all kinds of water plants in the corners. I wanted to put a little statue at the further end – a figure of a child – but although I hunted everywhere I couldn't find one I liked enough.

And then one Easter, when I was out, two men arrived with something wrapped up in sacking. Carefully they unwrapped it, took out what was inside, set it up on a little pedestal, and left it there.

When I came home with my shopping, what did I see? In the greatest amazement and delight I saw a little white figure of a child, sitting on the pedestal-stone, reading a book! Her head was bent over the book, and her hair fell forward. Her little feet were crossed, and she was as absorbed in her book as any child who ever read a story!

I went up to her. She was made of marble, beautifully carved – the dearest little child statue I had ever seen, with the most enchanting little face.

My husband had gone hunting round and had suddenly found her in a place where there were thousands of statues, figures, pillars, urns and goodness knows what! He had seen her quietly reading her book, and had thought, 'Why! Here is the very thing for an Enid Blyton garden – a child reading a book! What could be better – and such a dear little girl too!'

And so he had secretly arranged for her to be brought to Green Hedges just before Easter, for a real Easter surprise – and there I saw her, sitting at the end of the pond all by herself – reading her book! It was one of the loveliest surprises I have ever had.

Water-lilies grow in the other pond as well, masses of them in the summer – and goldfish breed there, but I will tell you about those when I talk about my pets. All round that little pond I have planted hundreds of crocuses, and their yellow and purple reflections are lovely to see in the water, when March is here.

The birds bathe in that pond too. I have a special bathing-stone for them, and they all know it. They hop on to it and have a lovely time. Sometimes there is quite a queue waiting for a turn. When an ill-mannered sparrow tries to jump the queue the thrushes get angry and chase him away. Quite right too!

I have hundreds of bulbs in my garden, most of which I have planted myself. I buy a few more each year. If you peeped in at my front gate in March you would see the front lawn there shining with hundreds of crocuses, gold, white, mauve and purple. Sometimes the children come and stand there, staring silently. I know how they feel because when I was their age I used to go and stand at a gate and stare at a little stretch of grass strewn with patches of brilliant crocuses. I liked to be alone and silent, so that I might feel that the carpet of crocuses belonged to me for a little while – and I know that some of the children who stand and stare in at my front gate feel exactly the same as I did.

I used to think to myself, 'Now, when I am grown-up I will have crocuses just like that, planted thickly in a patch of grass – and I will have them where people can stare at them.' Maybe you think things like that too.

There are hundreds of daffodils as well, dancing

everywhere in the spring. They are my favourite spring flowers. There is something so gay and carefree and friendly about daffodils, and they are so lovely in their yellow dresses. I do like a flower that moves about in the wind, don't you? I like the wind-flowers because of that, and the poppies. They all dance.

The flower I love best in the summer is the rose, and I expect it is one of your favourites too. So, as you can imagine, I have made myself a rose-garden. There are hundreds of rose-bushes in my rose-garden, all kinds of colours, all of them sweet-scented. I don't very much like a rose that doesn't smell – it might just as well be an artificial one! There are deep red velvety ones, pure white ones, golden-yellow roses and brilliant pink. There are orange ones and blush-pink ones, and every one is lovely.

All children like my rose-garden when the roses are out. They go from one rose to another, smelling them and touching the velvet petals of the deep crimson ones. When I was a little girl I had just one rose-tree in my garden, among my other flowers. I loved it, though it was very small and not a very good one. 'I will have *lots* of rose-trees when I am big,' I used to think. 'I don't care how hard I have to work, I'll have my roses!'

You would like the orchard trees at two different times of the year – when they are covered in dazzling blossom, and when they are covered in ripening fruit. We grow all our own vegetables and fruit, and I love to pick everything when it is new and fresh and ripe. You'd like to help in that, wouldn't you? Well, it *is* fun to go and pick the sprouts off the stalks of the big Brussels sprouts, and fun to

gather baskets of gooseberries, even if you do get pricked.

It is even better fun to go down the strawberry rows and see how many ripe strawberries you can find! I once had a dog who did that – and for a long time I could *not* discover why all the biggest strawberries disappeared!

You would like to help to pick the apples too – climbing up the long fruit ladder with a big basket that has a great hook on it to hang on the branch of the tree. And you would find it fun to get the lovely cob-nuts from the hazel trees, and share them with the squirrels who come each day! But perhaps you wouldn't be so eager to pick my little wild strawberries under the hedges for me to make jam, because they are very tiny and it takes a long time to pick even half a pound. It depends how patient you are!

I have some queer old trees – quince trees that bear fruit which looks rather as if someone had put together a lemon and a pear, and left the smell of the lemon in the fruit – it smells delicious. I leave quinces here and there about the house in the autumn, because of their fragrant citron-smell.

Of course you will find a lavender hedge, which I think should be in every garden! It's the sort of thing that is so nice to walk by, pulling at the leaves so that you get a lovely smell on your fingers which lasts for a long time. I do that with rosemary and thyme and southernwood too, and with an old briar-rose hedge, ten feet high! When I was a child I used to pass a briar hedge on my way to school, and each morning I crushed one leaf in my hands so that all morning long I could smell the smell if I wanted to. I was always

surprised to find that no shop ever sold briar-rose-leaf perfume.

What else is there to tell you about my garden? There is a tennis-court right at the bottom, because we all love tennis, and there is a dear little summer-house just by it. Here my children give their own tennis-parties in the summer, ask their own friends, and get ready their own tea. It's nice sometimes to have a little party without any grown-ups, isn't it?

I think you would like my garden. We all work in it. My husband likes doing the big things, such as cutting down old trees, or laying crazy-paving paths and, of course, he likes building an ENORMOUS bonfire, and then standing by it for a long time, admiring it, throwing more bits on to it, digging his fork into it to make it burn better, and altogether having a really lovely time.

Actually, we all of us like a bonfire – and it's the one bit of 'gardening' that brings the whole family together in a bunch. And how we all smell of bonfire smoke when we go back indoors!

I like to do smaller things – weed or plant bulbs or seeds, or bed out little plants. And like everyone else, I *love* wheeling a barrow. I like messing about in the greenhouse as well, and I like anything to do with water.

I expect you like all these things too, don't you?

3

My very first garden

One of the things you sometimes ask me is whether I ever had a little garden as a child. You usually ask me that question when you yourself have just been given a garden and you want to know what seeds to plant, and so on.

It is really lovely to have a little garden for yourself when you are small. But I do so hope that if you are given one, it will not be in a horrid shady little patch where nothing will grow – but will be a nice, sunny piece with good soil. It is so very disappointing when you are a child, and have your first garden, to find that nothing will grow well in it.

I had a very small one, but it was sunny and the soil was good. My father loved his garden, and he thought we children should have patches too. I can remember my little patch perfectly.

It was square, and ran from the path to the wall. I knew what to do because I had often watched my father in the big garden, and had helped him.

I dug it over well, as deeply as I could. I then got a trowel and broke up the earth as finely as possible, and made it smooth and level. It looked very nice, I thought.

And then came the exciting part. What should I plant in it? It was April, and everyone was planting seeds. I must plant seeds too. But I only had a penny a week and that wouldn't buy many seeds.

So my father made a bargain with me. 'If you want anything badly, you have to work for it,' he said. 'I will give you enough money to buy your own seeds, if you earn it. I want my bicycle cleaned – cleaned *well*, too. And I want the weeds cleared from that bed over there. If the work is done properly, it is worth sixpence to me, and that will buy you six packets of seeds.'

How I worked! I kept thinking of candy-tuft and shirley poppies and mignonette as I rubbed up that bicycle, and I thought of clarkia and nasturtiums and virginia stock as I pulled up handfuls of weeds.

So I earned the money for my first garden, and how proud I was when I went to spend my sixpence on those packets of seeds! I got the six I wanted. They were only a penny a packet in those days.

I planted my seeds. I read the instructions well and followed them exactly. I made labels. I planned my little patch carefully – the tiny virginia stock at the front edge. The candytuft and mignonette next. Then the clarkia and the shirley poppies. And at the back, the nasturtiums, which were climbing ones. I planned to let them climb up the wall on strings.

I looked each day to see if the seeds were coming up.

Then one warm morning after a rainy night, lo and behold, there were little green lines and patches in my garden – the seeds were coming up!

I told everybody. I told my family, and I told my teacher at school. I told the milkman and I told anyone who would listen. So you can guess how excited I was. But it *is* exciting when the very first seeds you have ever planted actually come up. I still find it exciting when I see my seeds poking up now.

My first garden was a great success. It was a good summer, and all my plants flourished. My father showed me how to thin out my seedlings. 'Better to have a few fine plants than lots of weaklings,' he said.

The next year I tried a few plants, as well as seeds. An aunt came to see us and gave me the magnificent sum of one shilling. That was riches to me!

I was most extravagant with my shilling, and actually didn't put even a penny into my piggy bank, though I quite meant to. I bought two button-daisy plants, one pink, one white. Do you know those little button-daisies? Most children love them. I bought a pansy plant too, because I always thought that pansies had faces that looked at me.

Some of you may know what I mean. Pansies do seem to look up at you. Some flowers never look at you – snowdrops, for instance. My pansy had a deep purple face with yellow in the centre, and wavy edges. I can still see it quite clearly, and although I have grown hundreds of pansy-faces since, I still think that one was the loveliest.

I also bought a tiny lavender plant that cost me threepence – and in two years' time it was a magnificent

bush, and I was able to pick enough lavender from it to fill a little bag for my mother's handkerchiefs.

The next year I had bigger ideas, and tried things like radishes and lettuces, and grew one solitary runner bean up the wall with my nasturtiums. It did very well too. I picked at least twenty pods from it! We had them one dinner-time, and I was very pleased when my mother said they were the nicest beans we'd ever had.

My lettuces were magnificent too – they were the tall kind, called Cos lettuce, and I tied them up just like my father tied his, so that they would get nice hearts. I shall never in my life forget having the first one at teatime with brown bread and butter and salt. I don't tell this sort of thing to grown-ups, of course, but you children will understand exactly how I felt. My radishes were also delicious – 'nice and *crumpy*', as one of my brothers said; hot too, and juicy.

I am always telling children to try to grow things if they can – seeds, plants, salads, vegetables, it doesn't matter what. It's like magic to see the seeds turning into little green plants, to see four tiny lettuce leaves grow into a fat, juicy lettuce, a tiny sprig of lavender become a great bush. People are happy when they grow things, especially children. If ever I was unhappy as a child I used to go and garden, and I still do the same if I am worried about anything.

Some people have what is called the 'green thumb'. That is, *anything* will grow for them, even if they just 'dib' it in. Other people are not so lucky – they haven't a 'green thumb', so nothing grows well.

But I have noticed that anyone who *really* loves flowers or gardens or messing about with the earth has a green thumb. Those who love flowers know how to handle them, gently, lovingly, roots, leaves, bulbs and all. And plants grow well for them, and always will. I do hope you have a green thumb when you garden. It does make such a difference!

Do have a garden if you can – but once you begin one, keep on with it. So often I hear a grown-up say: 'Well, John *did* have a nice little garden – but he soon got tired of it, you know, so it's part of the big garden now.'

What I learnt in my garden when I was small has made it possible for me to run my own big garden now. There is not a thing I don't know about my garden. I have mowed the lawns and weeded the paths, planted the seeds and pruned the roses. We have the most magnificent crops of fruit and vegetables.

But I know I could never have done it if my father hadn't given me that small patch long ago. I made my own 'green thumb' by working in it, learning about all the plants, and trying everything I could. What fun I had – just as much fun as you will have too, I hope.

4

Pets I have had

All children like pets, especially, of course, dogs and cats, and even better than those they like puppies and kittens. I only had one pet as a child, and that was a kitten who was sent away after I had had it for a fortnight. I was heart-broken. I called it Chippy, I don't know why, and I used to rush home from school to play with it.

My mother was not very fond of animals. My father loved all wild animals and birds, but he was not interested in dogs or cats because he loved his garden so much. He couldn't bear to think of animals rushing over his beautiful patches of violets, or breaking his delphiniums.

So my brothers and I never had any pets at all, and I used to spend much of my time playing with the kittens and puppies belonging to friends of mine. If you love animals you have got to be with them somehow, even if you haven't any of your own.

I kept caterpillars, though, but they were not allowed in the house. I had to keep them at the bottom of the garden in a shed. I couldn't *love* my caterpillars, though I liked them, and never forgot to feed them, and I liked feeling their funny little clingy feet walking over my hand. The only caterpillars I really liked immensely were the furry 'woolly bear' ones. You can stroke them. They are the hairy caterpillars of the tiger-moth and are lovely things.

I couldn't *love* caterpillars because it seemed rather a waste of love when they were going to stop being caterpillars and turn into something else. That really did seem like magic to me. I used to try very hard to be there when the chrysalis split open and out came a moth or a butterfly with limp and draggled wings.

'I will have all the cats and dogs and birds and fish I want when I am grown-up,' I said to myself. 'If I have to save for a year, I'll buy a dog of my own. And if I have children when I am grown-up and married, they shall have all the pets they want.'

That's one of the nice things about being a child – if you haven't got something you badly want you can always plan to have it when you are grown-up. And if you are determined enough you *do* get it, though it usually means working very hard. But things are much more precious to you if you have to work for them, and seem much more worthwhile then than if you just have them given to you.

Well, of course, when I was grown-up, I did get pets of my own; all kinds, from dogs and cats to goldfish and hedgehogs!

First I had a dog called Bobs. He was a handsome smooth-haired fox-terrier with a fine head. He was very clever indeed. If I said, 'Die for the King, Bobs!' he would at once roll over and pretend to be dead. And there he would lie, perfectly still, till I said, 'Come alive!' Then he would jump up and look for the biscuit he always got when he was a clever dog!

He could shut the door for me too. Not only that but he would listen for the 'click' of the door, to make sure it was properly shut. He could sit up and beg of course, even when a biscuit was balanced on his nose. I had him for years, a faithful companion, merry and intelligent.

Then I had a wife for him, an amusing little smooth-haired terrier called Sandy. Sandy was white with a sandy-coloured head, and she was a dear, affectionate little dog. The two of them lived in a little dog-house together. It had two doors, a partition between the two rooms, and a bench in each room, raised from the floor. Here Sandy had many beautiful puppies, so Gillian and Imogen, my two children, grew up always surrounded by dogs.

I had more fox-terriers after that, and the last was Topsy, a funny little dog with a black head, and just about the smallest brain I should think any dog ever had. You will see how queer she was when you hear the following story!

One day my children thought they would like to keep mice. So they bought some, and took them up to the nursery. They put the mice on a high bookcase, out of Topsy's way.

Topsy saw them running about in their cage, of course,

and she sat down in front of the book-case and watched them for hours.

We thought it was silly of Topsy to sit and stare like that for hours, and as the mice smelt rather strongly, I took the cage down to the verandah and put it there, where the mice were very happy. I put a clock on the bookcase in the place where the mice had been.

Topsy sat for hours and stared at the clock! We never could make out what she thought – whether she thought the mice had turned into the clock, or lived inside it, or what!

Anyway we really couldn't bear to see Topsy staring steadfastly at the clock all day long, so we put it on the mantelpiece and then there was nothing on the bookcase at all. But dear old Topsy still sat there, staring at nothing for hours and hours! She really was an absurd little dog.

Then one day she got into the garden next door and, for some extraordinary reason, killed nineteen hens and chicks – so we had to send poor Topsy away to someone who lived in a town, where there were no hens near. We were all very sad.

Then I had a dear little dog called Lassie, a black cocker spaniel. And now I have Laddie, also a spaniel, who appears in many of my books as Loony. We often think that Loony would be a better name for him than Laddie, because he really *is* such a lunatic sometimes!

He fetches all the mats and the cushions and some of the towels, and drapes them about the house – in the hall is one of his favourite places! He sometimes goes completely mad and tears up and down the stairs and round and round the

room at top speed. Yes, Loony would certainly be a better name for him!

I couldn't tell you how many cats and kittens I have had since I was grown up. I love Siamese cats, with their creamy coats, dark brown points and strange, brilliant blue eyes. I bred them for years, and many a time I have had as many as ten or twelve small Siamese kittens racing about, plaguing the life out of Bobs or Sandy. They are most amusing, and are really more like dogs than cats.

They look a bit like monkeys, they act rather like squirrels in the way they sit up and hold things, they have some of the nature of a dog – and yet they are cats! What a peculiar mixture! The one I have now, Bimbo, licks me like a dog, and follows me about like a dog too.

He will go after a little ball and bring it back in his mouth. I say, 'Drop it!' and he drops it for me to throw. he will hunt for anything I have hidden till he finds it. He is really beautiful.

I have had other cats, of course – tabby ones – a magnificent ginger one called Rufus – a black one with white socks. But Bimbo is the cleverest of them all.

5

More pets – common and uncommon

When I grew up I certainly made up for not being allowed to have pets when I was a child! I just couldn't have enough. I had a jackdaw whose foot had been caught in a shut window, and hurt badly. He was so tame that he hopped round the garden with me every day, saying 'Chack-chack-chack' at the top of his voice. And, at the same time, I had a tame magpie, whose wing had been hurt. He hopped round with Jackie, and how they talked!

Jackie and Maggie – they were a queer pair. They came with me whenever I gardened. I used to put a little glass jar beside me as I weeded and I popped into it all the grubs and leather-jackets and harmful insects I found. Up would come Jackie, cock his head on one side and look into the jar.

Then he would call Maggie, and they would solemnly dig their beaks into the jar in turn and feast. They liked to

perch on my shoulders, one on each side, as soon as I came out into the garden. They lived at night in an enormous old parrot cage out-of-doors. Jackie knew how to undo the latch with his beak – and he would let them both out in the morning as soon as it was light! He was much cleverer than the magpie.

They both shared a most infuriating trick. If I put down my silver pencil or took off my silver thimble for one moment, one or other of them would pick it up as quick as lightning and go off with it! It would then be well hidden somewhere – and I might come across it under a heap of dead leaves or tucked into a patch of alyssum or lobelia – or I might never find it again.

Anything bright attracted the pair – a bit of silver paper, a piece of broken glass. They were a lively intelligent couple, and I loved them. Jackie died of old age. Maggie mourned him bitterly, and then, one spring day, she flew off to join the other magpies in a wood nearby.

But often she would fly back to the tree at the bottom of my garden and call to me: 'I'm back!' And I would go down to talk to her. She would fly on to my shoulder for a minute or two – and then off she would go again. Do you love birds? I have always loved them and if you do love them they will become very tame indeed with you – especially the garden birds.

I have had many tortoises too – one enormous fellow called Thomas. Goodness knows how old he was! We would miss him for days – and then suddenly there he would be, making his way slowly and deliberately across the lawn to us to say how-do-you-do.

He loved being scratched under the chin. He loved a feast of rose-petals. He would gobble them up by the dozen. He also liked my young delphiniums and I had to put wire round each one! He had little beady bright eyes, and he certainly wasn't stupid.

He always knew when it was time for his winter sleep. He would come along, looking very slow and tired. I would put him into a box of earth or straw, cover him with an old rug, and put him into a cold shed. There he would sleep soundly till the spring. Now I have another Thomas, a smaller tortoise, who is very lively for a tortoise and gets along at a great speed. Bimbo can't understand him and stalks him wherever he goes.

Laddie thinks Thomas is a kind of walking bone and sniffs at him with enormous interest whenever they meet. The tortoise sticks his head under his shell at once. He doesn't trust Laddie!

A dog with a sense of humour will often play a trick on a tortoise. I have seen it done many a time. The dog turns the tortoise upside down with a flick of his paw. Then he settles down to watch the unfortunate creature trying to get the right way up again.

The tortoise begins a kind of see-saw, to and fro, to and fro, rocking himself until at last, with one big rock, he turns the right way up!

And then, unless I prevent it, the dog turns the tortoise upside down once more! Bobs used to do that continually, and, when she was little, Gillian often used to have to turn the poor tortoise the right way up and shoo Bob away!

I have had pet hedgehogs too. Do you like hedgehogs? I

do. The hedgehog is a quaint little animal. I like his sharp little snout, and his very bright eyes. I like the way he rolls himself up and then peeps out.

I once had one who lived with me for a very long time. I gave him bread and milk for his food and he lapped it up greedily. He would even go to the cat's bowl and drink the cat's milk – when the cat was there too!

When he was tired he used to come into the dining room, where it was cool and dim in the summer-time, and creep under the iron fire grate. He would curl up and go fast asleep – and I would hear tiny little snores!

'Urr-urr,' he would go. 'Urr-urr.' Hedgehogs often snore, especially in the winter when they are sleeping in the ditches. I don't know why I like them even better because they snore, but I do.

Then I have had toads for pets. One enormous one was called Terence. He really was a giant. He was perfectly tame, and appeared out of nowhere one rainy afternoon, climbing up on my doorstep. I couldn't *think* what was scrabbling out there – so I opened the door to look. And it was Terence!

After that Terence attached himself to me, and whenever I gardened he would appear sooner or later, looking at me with with his beautiful eyes. Have you seen the eyes of a toad? They are like jewels, coppery bright, and are most surprising to see in such a queer, grotesque animal. Terence loved being tickled with a straw right in the middle of his back. He would stand still in delight and then put up a hind leg and solemnly scratch the place I had tickled.

I had Terence for years – and then I moved and came here. Terence was nowhere to be seen that day or I would have taken him with me. I have often wondered if he is still in that old garden of mine.

I once had a young swan too, that had been caught in a telegraph wire when flying, and had hurt its wing. I found it quietly sitting in the middle of the lane outside my house.

I lifted it up gently and saw that its wing was hurt. It let me tuck it under my arm, and I took it back home. It was a beautiful young thing, gentle and grateful.

In the end one of the royal swan-men came from up the river and took it away. I was sorry to see it go. I heard afterwards that the man kept it in a swan-pen till its wing was quite healed, and then let it go.

The next year a magnificent swan flew down into my garden. I had a big pond there and it swam on it for a while, then climbed out and waddled behind a row of trees. There he and another swan, his mate, built up an enormous pile of stuff for a nest – and to my delight I saw a giant egg there one day. They usually covered up the egg if they left the nest, but that day it was uncovered.

I was so pleased. I couldn't help wondering if one of the swans was the one I had found the year before with the hurt wing.

Then alas – two boys found the nest and the swans. They could see them through the hedge – and that was the end of the nest. They threw stones at the swans, alas, and the lovely birds never came again. I think both those boys should have been well and truly punished, don't you?

We have had all kinds of other pets – mice and stick-

insects and goat-moth caterpillars, and hurt chaffinches and robins and thrushes, and once a dear little slow-worm. It had been found in the road, dazed – but it soon got better. It would coil itself right up in my hands.

Do I see some of you shudder? Nonsense! Surely you don't belong to the tribe of children who squeal at bats and shudder at grass-snakes and run away from moths? You certainly wouldn't like living at Green Hedges then!

I've had hens and ducks and turkeys too, of course. Hens are rather stupid, but ducks are real characters. As for turkeys, they are queer creatures! I once had only one left from a hatching – and so I let it live with the hens. It thought it was a hen, and ran about happily with the chickens. But it never knew when it was time to go to roost. It would suddenly find itself all alone in the run and look round in fright. Where, oh where were the others? It would run about looking for them – and then it would remember the hen-house. Ah yes – it would look in there! And there would be the hens, of course. The turkey would clamber in thankfully, and roost in with them. I really don't think he *ever* knew he was a turkey!

6

The little round pond

I always like water in a garden – a pond or a stream. Here, at Green Hedges, as I told you, I have two ponds, one rather big formal one, oblong in shape – the other a much smaller one, quite round, set with crazy paving at the edge.

I had it made a few years ago, for two reasons – the sort of reasons for which *you* would like to have a pond. One reason was that I wanted to have somewhere for birds to come and drink or have a bathe – and the other reason was that I wanted to breed goldfish.

I have a very big verandah, stretching all along the south side of the house. I sit there to write books for you from the beginning of April to the middle of October. I wanted to have the pond near there, so that I could watch the birds.

There is a little lawn there, surrounded by a pergola of rambler-roses, and backed by a great high bank of rhododendron, which is a grand sight in May and June. I

thought I would have the pond in the middle of the lawn.

It was soon made. It is deep enough for two plants of water-lilies, one yellow and one deep-pink. There is plenty of other water-weed there too. I planted it myself by getting sprays of water-weed, tying a stone to the end of each and dropping the stone into the water. Its weight pulled the weed to the bottom where it soon rooted and grew.

I put in the bathing-stone for the birds, as I told you, and I remembered how I used to love to watch my fantail pigeons come down and bathe. Their brilliant white plumage was reflected in the pond, and when they stood round, it was as if they were all double-pigeons – a lovely sight!

I haven't any fantails now but I shall put up my pigeon-house again one of these days, I hope. Then I shall see fantails once more round my pond and hear their soft voices saying 'rookity-coo' to one another, all day long. I had twenty at one time and when I came out to feed them they would fly around my head like a cloud, making my hair fly, too, in the wind from their wings. They were just as tame as the pigeons in Trafalgar Square in London.

But to come back to my pond. I put the bathing-stone there, and I hoped the birds would soon find it. They did, of course, and each summer now I sit on my big swing-seat, watching big glossy blackbirds bathe, and freckled thrushes. I see the starlings come down in a 'murmuration', as their flock is sometimes called, and splash busily and hurriedly. Then they all fly back to the nearest tree, and if I

walk under it I am splashed with thousands of silvery drops as the starlings shake themselves dry!

The chaffinches come down, and the greenfinches. The beautiful goldfinches come, little fairy birds as charming as their name. Last summer they brought their family with them – three pretty little youngsters. How we held our breath when they all dipped beaks into our pond and drank! We felt very honoured.

Two hawfinches come, rarer birds, with enormous beaks, heavy and clumsy-looking. We are always pleased to see them, because they are so shy and easily scared that we feel it is a great compliment to have them. Two bullfinches come to the pond to drink, too, magnificent in their black and red. We see the pair together all year round, shy and very handsome. Wagtails come; robins, of course, sparrows by the dozen, a neat little hedge-sparrow or two, and sometimes two beautiful ring-doves.

Some bathe. All of them drink, dipping in their beaks and lifting up their heads to let the water run down their throats. The robin always sings a note or two of thanks, in a rich, creamy little voice. Sometimes the fly-catchers come, and then we watch in delight. Tits of all kinds arrive – the great tit 'ringing his bell', so loud is his voice. We always know when *he* is about!

But I didn't make my pond only for the birds. It was for goldfish too. I started off with two. They are big ones, one very big. They liked the pond very much. They examined everything in it. When the hot summer sun blazed down on the pond, the water became very warm. I dipped a thermometer into it.

'It's over 62 degrees!' I said. 'It's warm enough for them to breed. They will lay eggs and we shall have baby goldfish!'

They laid many eggs, but only one hatched out. It grew into a pretty little greeny-grey fish. The following spring it lost its green-grey look and became a curious purplish colour. Then suddenly the purple seemed to peel off or disappear – and the little fish turned a bright pure gold!

We were so pleased. My children lay by the pond watching the fish, hoping to see more. But only one was hatched out that first year.

The next year we had more – and we counted sixteen fish in all. The following spring they all turned gold except one, but he didn't seem to mind. We now had quite a fleet of goldfish sailing around!

I began to tame them. It was quite easy. Soon they all came swimming up in a crowd when I went to the pond and called, 'Come along, come along!' or rippled the water with my hand. They would feed out of my hand, and it was nice to feel their little mouths nibbling my fingers. They loved biscuit crumbs.

I hope we shall have many hot summers – then I shall have plenty of baby fish – enough, I hope, to stock the big pond at the back of the house.

One of the goldfish is a real character. He doesn't like the birds to come and drink or bathe. I suppose he regards the pond as his. Anyway, as soon as a bird stands on the bathing-stone, he swims up to it and butts his head against the bird's legs, trying to scare it away! And if he sees a row of little sparrows drinking, he swims over to them and

knocks their beaks. He really is a lively and amusing little fellow!

I always wanted a pond of my own. It's nice to long for a thing and make up your mind to get it and work for it. It brings you such great pleasure when at last you have got it and enjoy it. I don't think I have ever enjoyed anything quite so much as my pond. My family all love it too, and so do friends when they come to visit me.

We sit and watch the red and pink reflections of the rhododendron bank in the water, and see the birds come to bathe, and watch the goldfish jump at flies. I hope you too will have a pond of your own someday. You will love it just as much as I love mine!

7

About my childhood – the books I read

One of the questions you so often ask me is about my childhood. You are in the middle of yours. You quite naturally want to know what mine was like. Did I play the same games as you do? Did I like reading? What books did I read? What things did I like doing best of all?

Well, I was quite an ordinary little girl. I am perfectly certain that not one of the grown-ups round me then ever guessed for one moment that I was going to be your story-teller when I grew up.

I had two brothers and no sisters, though I always longed for one. I went to school, of course, to a kindergarten that I loved. I remember everything about it – the room, the garden, the pictures on the wall, the little chairs, the dog there, and the lovely smells that used to creep out from the kitchen into our classroom. I remember how we used to take biscuits for our mid-morning break

and swap them with one another – and how we used to dislike one small boy who was clever at swapping a small biscuit for a big one.

I was lucky enough to have an excellent memory, and those of you who also have good memories will know what a real blessing it is. It means that you can learn a list of spellings or a poem in a quarter of the time that others can. When I was eight or nine I could read down a page once, then shut my eyes and repeat it word for word. I never forgot what I had read. I can still shut my eyes and see a page of my geography book – 'Manufactures: Macclesfield for silk. Luton for hats. Leeds for woollen goods. Sheffield for steel goods ...' and so on.

Many of you are probably the same, and can memorise so easily that you will never forget the things you learn now. I often wish I had learnt poetry then – it is the easiest time in your life to memorise things, and you never forget them – it means that you have a store of lovely quotations to draw on for the rest of your life.

I loved school, every minute of it. I loved learning. Nothing was ever dull to me, not even sums, which I was not good at doing. I hadn't the right kind of brain for figures and I used to look on in awe when I saw other boys and girls doing the most complicated sums. How clever they were, I thought!

But if you are not clever at figures you are usually good at something else, so it doesn't really matter. I did my best at figures, but it wasn't a very good best, and I got used to seeing my name at the bottom of the arithmetic class.

'So long as I get to the top in something else I'll be all

right,' I used to think. And what did I get to the top in? Yes – essay and composition and story-writing. I am sure you all guessed that easily!

The things I liked best of all at school when I was at the kindergarten were the things I have liked best all my life – stories – music – nature – and games. Most children like these, even if they don't like them best.

Like you, I could listen to stories by the hour, and read them by day or night! But I didn't like *all* stories. Some I found dull and boring, just as you do. I have some of my old school books and, looking through them the other day, I found a good many of them dull and boring still. So would you! Some of my story-books were deadly dull, too – there were no real children as characters, and it was children I badly wanted to read about, in the same way that you do; there was no lively conversation in the books, telling exactly what the speakers were like, just as conversation does in real life; nothing really to make me laugh.

What did I read? I read *Alice in Wonderland, Alice Through the Looking-Glass, The Water-Babies* (and skipped the part where all those long and extraordinary words come), *Black Beauty*, which I loved, though some of it was too sad, and, of course, *Little Women* which I read again and again. Those children were real children. I am sure you like that book too. 'When I grow up *I* will write books about real children,' I thought. 'That's the kind of book I like the best. That's the kind of book I would know how to write.'

I read every single old myth and legend I could get hold

of – the old Norse myths, the old Greek myths, which I thought were beautiful, but rather cruel. I still think that. I read every old folk tale I could find, from countries all over the world.

I read Arthur Mee's *Children's Encyclopedia* from end to end, and then read it all over again. You should do that too, if you can get hold of a children's encyclopedia. It gave me my thirst for knowledge of all kinds, and taught me as much as ever I learnt at school. It sent me questing through my father's vast array of bookcases for other books – books on astronomy, nature, poetry, history, old legends. There were many volumes above my head that I found and read because I *had* to know more about the things I read in the *Children's Encyclopedia.*

Perhaps it isn't fair to tell you the books I read that bored me, and that I didn't like. Some of them are what are called 'classics' and maybe you will be given them to read, and I don't want to put you against them. There are classics and classics. Some are exactly right for you and some are quite unsuitable. *Little Women* is a classic and you will love it because it is a real children's book. Other books which are classics are *not* children's books, and you really shouldn't read them till you are older. Otherwise they will be spoilt for you. It is a great pity, I think, that so much of our fine literature is disliked and never read by adults nowadays, simply because they read it far too early in life. I hope you won't be forced to make that mistake.

I couldn't bear most of Grimm's fairy-tales, and I don't like them now. I thought some of them were cruel and frightening. I loved Hans Andersen's tales, but I found some

were too sad. Most children don't like reading cruel or too-sad tales, and I was like that – cheerful, lively and, I hope, kind-hearted. I hated anything cruel or miserable. I didn't like reading about frightening things, either, any more than you do.

I liked all nature books, but I found some of them written in a very boring way. I made up my mind to write nature books some day – 'and I'll put children into them who want to know things, just like myself,' I thought. I kept my word, as you know!

I liked all the Wonder Books, and I loved Annuals. You do too, as I very well know! There is something about an Annual that you don't find in any other book. It's so *full* of so many different kinds of things – what one of my young brothers once called 'a dippable-into book'.

I was fond of poetry, too, although I didn't always understand it. It was one of the things I liked reading even when it was above my head. The lilt of the lines and the beautiful stringing-together of words lifted up my heart. My father was fond of poetry too, and he used to quote it so often that it became part of my life. I hope you like poetry. I don't only like reading it, I like writing it too, though it is far, far more difficult than writing stories. Have you ever tried writing poetry?

As you can see, I read an enormous amount. I think all writers do. They pack all they have read and heard and seen down into their imagination, and there it waits, simmering together, till the time comes to pull it out and put it into a book.

My father had hundreds of books of all kinds on every

subject under the sun that interested him. He read, he wrote, he painted, he played the piano endlessly (and the banjo, which I and my brothers loved!) and he was a very fine naturalist. He was an amateur astronomer too, and had a large telescope. So as you can imagine, there was no end to the reading I was able to do in my childhood – books on every conceivable subject.

There were bookcases full of French books too – some of them novels, some verse, some essays, many plays. As soon as I could read French, I read every book in his bookcases of French books. Actually, I read the first one before I could read French properly – I remember it now, it was a book I loved, called *Tartarin de Tarascon.* I waded through it, with a dictionary beside me, *determined* to go right through to the end. And by the time I had finished the book I could read French almost as easily as I could read English. I offer this to you as a most useful hint – if you want to read French quickly and enjoy it, without having to wade through the subject for years, do as I did!

I was about to begin on my father's rather smaller collection of German books, and had just got some way through the first volume, when he discovered that I was borrowing them. He was horrified.

'I will not have you borrowing adult books like this,' he said. 'I shall lock up the bookcases in future.'

So he did. I hadn't even guessed I was doing wrong, but it didn't really matter about the bookcases being locked as by that time there wasn't a book I hadn't read, except the German ones. When I hadn't any other book to read I took down one of his enormous encyclopedias and dipped into

that. I learnt some very peculiar facts, which pop up now and again in the books I write for you! Stalagmites, stalactites, copper mines, great auks, whirlpools – and many, many more.

I read other things, of course. Magazines of all kinds poured into our house because we belonged to a 'Magazine Club' and everyone in our road took in a magazine, read it and passed it on. So I read most of the magazines published then, from the *Strand Magazine* which I loved, to *Punch* which I also loved. I read my brothers' books too, and their comics. I thought that comics were all right just to pass the time, but I never found that I wanted to remember anything in them. They were like sweets – you sucked them for a few minutes, then they were gone, and you didn't think about them any more. But a good book was like a very good dinner, sound and satisfying.

The book I loved best as a young child, and read at least twelve times, was *The Princess and the Goblin*, by George Macdonald. It wasn't so much the story as the strange 'feel' of the tale, the 'atmosphere' as we call it. It hung over me for a very long time, and gave me pleasant shivers.

I loved *Alice in Wonderland* too, and it made me laugh as few books read in my childhood did. Some of the humour was above my head and is probably above yours too. Still, I loved it.

And I also loved *Coral Island* by Ballantyne. It set me off dreaming of adventures of all kinds. I wonder if you would like it. Probably not. After the exciting serials on the radio and television, and the cinema films you see, the Coral Island might seem dull to you.

I liked many other books but those were the ones I remember best and with most pleasure. How I should have loved the books that so many writers write for you today! You really are very lucky, you know.

8

My happiest times

My happiest childhood times were when I was reading and dreaming, when I was playing games with other children, and when I was out in the country or by the sea. Very much like your happiest times, I expect!

I have told you about my reading. The games I played were much the same as yours, of course – Red Indians, Burglars and Policemen, Making a House somewhere – behind a bush, or up a tree, or under a table. We had tops and hoops and marbles as the seasons came round.

We played a great many card games, because we all loved cards. So do my own girls. We played Snap and Happy Families, Old Maid and Beggar-My-Neighbour.

We also played board games such as Snakes and Ladders (and sometimes Ladders and Snakes – going up the snakes and down the ladders, instead of the other way round!). When I was six my father taught me to play draughts,

and a little later he taught me to play chess. That was just before I was seven. He thought that all young children should learn to play chess. 'If they have any brains it will train them to think clearly, quickly and to plan things a long way ahead,' he said. 'And if they haven't any brains it will make the best of those they have!' I don't know if he was right. I know that I enjoyed the games immensely. I wonder if any of you who are reading this book can play chess?

My father, as I have said before, was among other things a fine naturalist. Looking back, I think probably he was more of a naturalist than anything else. I didn't even know what a naturalist was, at that time – all I knew was that my father loved the countryside, loved flowers and birds and wild animals, and knew more about them than anyone I had ever met. And what was more he was willing to take me with him on his expeditions, and share his love and his knowledge with me!

That was marvellous to me. It's the very best way of learning about nature if you can go for walks with someone who really knows.

'Look – there goes a coal tit – watch for the white streak on the nape of his neck, and you'll always be able to pick him out from the other tits!

'Listen – do you hear that call? It's the yellowhammer, and he's crying for "a little bit of bread and no cheese!" Listen again – now you'll know it.

'See this hazel twig? It has two flowers on it. Find them both. Yes – the yellow catkin is one – but where's the other? Good girl, you're right – it's the little bud-like thing

with the red spikes hanging out. We'll look for the hazel nuts in the autumn – and you'll see they grow from the red-spiked flowers!

'Now we'll watch for rabbits here. Sit down. Don't make a single sound. If you learn to be quiet you will see ten times more when you're out in the country. There's a rabbit peeping now, look.'

In those days it was considered to be quite an ordinary thing to collect birds' eggs. Nowadays we teach children not to, because it distresses the birds and it might lead to many kinds gradually becoming extinct.

My father collected birds' eggs, and he had a wonderful cabinet of little drawers full of beautiful eggs, neatly arranged and labelled. One of the things I had to do to help him was to insert my hand into holes in trees to see if any tit's nest was there, and to feel for eggs.

I never did like taking the eggs. I did so hope the bird wouldn't mind. Fortunately my father never wanted more than one egg. He never knew how scared I was of putting my hand down into those small holes. Once I heard a hissing noise down a hole, and I was sure it was an adder hiding there. I was afraid of being bitten, but I didn't like to say so.

I just said, 'What's that hissing noise?'

'Probably a tit,' said my father. 'They hiss sometimes when they are frightened. Put your hand in and feel if there are any eggs.'

My hand was very tiny for my age, and it went into the hole quite easily, but it was trembling. How I hoped my father was right! I put up one of my little prayers to God:

'Please don't let it be an adder, please don't!'

It wasn't. My father was right and it was a tit's nest. There were nine eggs. They felt so warm and sweet under my hand and so did the frightened little bird.

'You needn't take an egg,' said my father. 'Just tell me how many there are in case the number breaks our record of eggs in a tit's nest.'

Weekend after weekend I went out with my father. Looking back, it seems as if those days were always warm, always sunny, and that the sky was always as deeply blue as the cornflowers in my garden, or as faintly blue as the harebells on the common. We were lucky to have woods and commons, ponds and lanes so near. We explored everywhere and everything – watching the lizards play on the sunny banks, listening to the willow-warblers singing, poking down a hole that my father said badgers had been in, looking for the white violets we knew always blossomed in a certain dell.

And now perhaps you know how it is that I can write nature books for you! All my childhood was steeped in the sunshine of the woods and commons and lanes, and what I didn't find out from nature herself, I read about in books, and then searched for it again. I was perfectly happy, even when I wandered about alone, finding flowers to look up in our reference books, trying to discover what bird was singing, learning the difference between a thrush's nest and a blackbird's, and a hundred other things.

'One day I'll put all these things into a book,' I said, though I didn't tell anyone that, of course.

I learnt how to keep *really* still when I went fishing with

my father. I was not allowed to utter a sound or to make the slightest movement. There we sat, watching the little floats bobbing on the river or the lake. I didn't much like the fishing itself, but what I did like was the chance to become a mere shadow, something that didn't move or speak – so that I could watch unceasingly all that went on round me.

'Tee-tee-tee!' a kingfisher would cry, darting by like a flash of blue lightning.

Then two or three butterflies would bob round me. A bee would fly down to a bright pattern on my dress. 'He thinks I'm a flower!' I would say to myself, in delight. A beetle would scurry by, up and down blades of grass. A ladybird would walk over my leg, and perhaps a caterpillar too. I loved the feel of their tiny feet. Then maybe a robin would drop down beside me like a leaf, and sit so close that I could almost touch him.

He would look at me enquiringly as if to say, 'Are you real? Are you alive? You don't move or make a noise. I've a good mind to perch on you!' And I would hold my breath and hope that he would. The first time one ever hopped on to my bare knee, it filled me with such surprise and delight that I jerked – and he flew off.

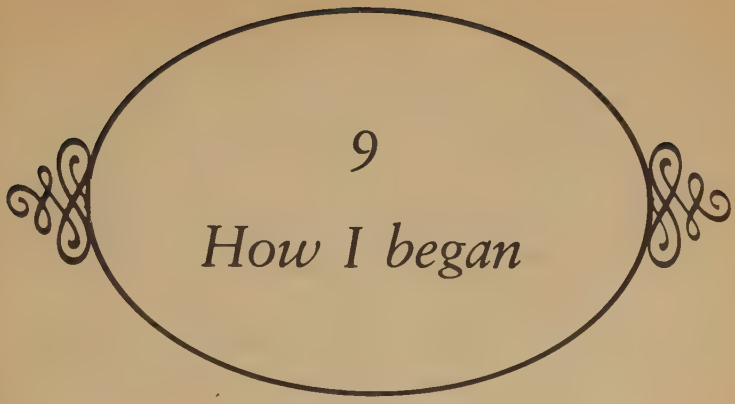
Now, in my garden at Green Hedges, I have robins so tame that they will hop over the tea-things on the tray, and chaffinches that will fly down to my knee and take crumbs from my fingers. Gillian once had a robin and a chaffinch on her knee at once – she was crimson with delight!

I am telling you about these things because I know that most of you are nature-lovers too. It *matters* to us if birds

hop on to our knees, doesn't it? It matters to us if we can persuade a hedgehog to drink bread and milk from our saucer, or if we can rescue a hurt bird and heal it enough to let it fly away. It matters to us if we see bluebells picked and then thrown away to die by the roadside, or if we find a duck hurt by a stone.

I hope you will be lucky enough to find someone who will take you out into the country and teach you as I was taught. It is the best way to learn. The next best way is to read nature books, and then go out by yourself or with a companion who thinks the same as you, and explore the woods and the commons – looking up everything you can in a reference book when you get back.

You can love nature and be a naturalist no matter what else you are. There is nothing quite so interesting or satisfying as being a naturalist, and it is never-ending. You can learn thousands of new facts, but there are always thousands more. I like that, and I know you do too!



9
How I began

That is one question so many of you ask me – and grown-ups ask it too. 'How did you *begin* writing, Miss Blyton?' Well, let me tell you this straight away. I meant to be a writer from the time I could read and write, even before that, I think. There are some children who know from the beginning what they want to do, and mean to do.

Usually those children have a gift for that particular thing. They feel impelled to write, or to compose tunes, or to paint pictures. It is something they cannot help, something that is given to them when they are born. How fortunate they are!

But all gifts must be practised and trained, a great deal of hard work must go into them – unremitting, never-ending work, every minute of which is worthwhile. No idling, no slacking, no half-measures – a gift is such a precious possession that it must be trained to perfection.

If a child has a gift, then I think it should be developed

and encouraged as far as is possible – but first and foremost the child should have an ordinary, natural childhood, and above all shouldn't be spoilt, pushed on too much, or made conceited. A gift will flower all the more if the child has many, many interests, and plenty of character. So, my dears, if you have any 'gifts', don't expect people to turn you into a horrid little 'prodigy' and make you grown-up long before it's time!

Those of you who have written to me to say you write well, or draw well, or dance marvellously will have noticed that I don't tell you how wonderful you are when I write back. Instead I tell you to learn all you can at school, to play games, to read a lot, to practise your gift within reason – and wait till you are old enough before you expect to be thought one of the world's wonders!

What you *don't* know is that often I have letters from some of you who consider yourselves quite ordinary – and I think: 'Ah – this child will write one day'; or, 'Well, well – this boy will probably be one of our leading naturalists in ten years' time'; or, 'This girl's little sketches of horses are excellent. She may illustrate one of my books when she's grown-up, if only she's not pushed on too much.'

Wouldn't you love to see the little list of names I have of likely geniuses? I shan't tell you them because as soon as a child thinks he's wonderful, he ceases to be anyone worthwhile.

Well, to come back to my own childhood. I always meant to write. I didn't know that I had the gift, of course, I only knew that I liked making up stories better than I liked doing anything else.

I was an ordinary child, as I have told you. I did the things that all children do, I had the same fears, the same likes and dislikes, and did as many bad and good things as you do.

But I was different in one way, though I didn't know it then. Maybe all story-writers are the same in their childhood. I don't know.

When I went to bed I used to lie still and wait for my 'thoughts'. I didn't know what else to call them then. I suppose now I would say that I waited for my 'imagination' to set to work.

In a minute or two my 'thoughts' would come flooding into my mind. I distinguished them easily from my ordinary thinking. In my ordinary thinking I thought what I wanted to think – but in these 'thoughts' I wasn't thinking as usual at all. They seemed to come from somewhere else, not myself.

They were stories, of course. They came then as they do now, out of nowhere – out of my imagination, or from my subconscious, out of whatever or wherever it is that writers, composers and poets get the thoughts and melodies and rhymes that flood into their conscious minds.

What were the stories that came into my mind? There were stories about myself, of course – I did brave deeds, I remember, in my 'thoughts', I had many adventures, the favourite of which was being wrecked on an island somewhere, and having to do as Robinson Crusoe did and make a home for myself. Sometimes it was in a tree, sometimes in a cave.

There were bears in one story, and I didn't like them.

But with 'thoughts' that came from nowhere I had to accept everything that arrived. These bears, however, worried me a great deal, and I kept dreaming about them, and was terrified.

Then one night I said to myself, 'This is horrid. Next time I dream about bears coming to eat me I will go up to them, hold out my hand and tell them I am pleased to see them.'

That was easy to plan, of course. But listen to what happened! That night I dreamt about the bears again. There were two of them, one big, one small. I can see them now, ambling over to me, grunting.

Fear gripped me, as usual, but somehow I remembered what I had planned. In my dream I walked up to the bears and held out my hand. 'I'm pleased to see you,' I said.

The bears solemnly shook hands with me – and immediately and forever my night-fears fell away. When I awoke, I remembered my dream. 'I shall do that with everything that frightens me,' I said. 'I like bears now. Perhaps I shall be able to cuddle a baby bear in my dreams.'

I did – and you will remember, children, that in many of my books there are bears. But are there any horrible bears? No, there are not. There is even the bear called Bobbo, the baby bear that little Ursula loved so much, and carried about with her. Do you remember? It is in 'Come to the Circus', and that little bear must have come straight out of my childhood dreams.

I once told my father how I had conquered my fear of dreaming about bears. I didn't often tell my thoughts, but I

was rather amazed at the success I had had over the dream-bears.

My father listened. 'You did right,' he said. 'Face up always to anything you are afraid of and, like the bears, you'll find you've conquered it.' Well, that seemed a very sensible piece of advice to me, and I have followed it all my life. I pass it on to you. You will find it as useful and as sensible as I did!

Now, to come back to my 'stories'. Every night they went on and on in my head till I fell asleep. They were about children I knew and children I didn't know. They were adventures, some with animals in them, and soon I found that they appeared to be made up of many of the things that had happened to me, or that I had read about or heard of in the months that had passed.

But everything was different in my 'night stories'. It was all mixed up, rather like dreams are, but each story had its own definite thread – its beginning and middle and ending. It was almost as if instead of some part of my mind mixing everything into a senseless muddle, as dreams are mixed up, that part of my mind had gone carefully and miraculously to work, and had sorted out all the odd bits and pieces of my life and thoughts and reading, and had produced an interesting pattern of them – a kind of design.

And the pattern or design it produced was a story. Now isn't that odd? I hope you understand what I am trying to explain. It is really very difficult because it all seems a bit like magic. To take a jumble and make of it, not a silly dream, but a sensible story, without even trying to, is most strange. Who does the sorting out and piecing together?

How is it done? How does it come back into my mind all finished and perfect, unwinding itself from beginning to end? Do *I* do the sorting out; do *I* arrange the pattern of the story?

No, I don't. I couldn't. If I tried I should write a poor, laboured story, in correct grammar and good English – but it wouldn't be the kind of story you like! It wouldn't be the kind of story you can't put down till you've finished it. No, there's something else at work, something bigger than the writer.

It is the same kind of thing that goes on in a composer's mind. The greatest works in music are not deliberately thought out, invented, laboured over – they are pulled out from somewhere deep in the composer's mind or soul, I don't know which, and he gives them musical notation, just as a writer gives his imagination words. We can only say, 'It is a gift'. And those who have a 'gift' cannot tell how it works.

I didn't know that my 'night-stories' were anything out of the ordinary at all. I thought all children lay awake for a while at night and let their minds flood with stories and imaginings that apparently came from nowhere. I used to get so thrilled that sometimes, when I had unfortunately fallen asleep too soon, I would long to go to bed the next night in order to go on with the story!

Before I could write I used to *tell* my brothers my stories. After I could write I found just as much pleasure in writing them down – more, I think, because I began to find I liked handling words.

I didn't only write stories. I wrote verse, too, after the

Beginning a new book – with Laddie to help.

Just part of the big bookcase where Enid Blyton kept all the books she had written.

Playing tennis with Kenneth Darrell Waters.

'What are you writing now, Mummy? Oh – an adventure story! We'll read it as you type!'

style of nursery rhymes. My brothers thought those were silly and they probably were – but I liked the lilt of the verse, even if it was nonsense. I was trying out my gift, though I didn't know it.

I remember quite well the first rhyme I ever made up. This was it:

'My kitten cat is white and fat,
Her eyes are green and round-o,
Along she goes on tippy-toes
And never makes a sound-o.'

Do you know how I wrote it? Well, I took the rhyme of 'Jack and Jill went up the hill,' and simply made up my little verse to the same lilt, and the same rhyme-scheme! Work it out for yourself and you will see that 'Jack and Jill' and my funny little verse are made in exactly the same way.

From these first beginnings, and from the pleasure I took in the sound and meaning of words, came all my other poems. Anything that aroused my love or admirtion seemed to need special words and special lilts, and gradually I left the little 'nursery rhymes' and began to experiment with the making of poetry.

Throughout my childhood I did several other things that most writers do and that you too will have to do if you have any talent as a writer.

I kept a diary regularly, every single day. But I didn't only write down my daily doings, I wrote down anything interesting that I thought or that I read. Year after year I kept my diary, and never missed a day. I know a great many

of you do that yourselves, and it's a very useful thing to do.

I wrote letters. I wrote letters to anyone I thought wouldn't mind having one. I also wrote letters to imaginary people. My family thought this was silly and I suppose it did seem a silly thing to do – to write endless letters – but letter-writing is something that all true writers love, and which, as a rule, they do extremely well. I love it still. I really enjoy sitting down to write a good long letter to a friend.

I also read a great deal, as I have told you. You must, if you want to be a writer – you must read and read and read. Try everything, good, bad and indifferent. Sort it out in your mind. Distinguish between what you feel to be good and what isn't worth reading. But do your reading yourself, choose for yourself, browse in the bookshops, go to the libraries. Form your own taste, and find your own interests.

It is good to take advice. It is good to read books that wiser people tell you are worth reading. But form your own judgment, and don't pretend to like a book if you dislike it or if it bores you. We can't all like the same things.

Anyhow – READ! Books, papers, magazines, everything. Fill your mind with all kinds of interesting things – the more you have in it, the more will come out of it. Nothing ever comes out of your mind that hasn't already been put into it in some form or other. It may come out changed, re-arranged, polished, shining, almost unrecognizable – but nevertheless it was you who put it there first of all. Your thoughts, your actions, your reading, your sense of humour, everything gets packed into your mind, and if you

use your imagination, what a wonderful assortment it will have to choose from!

And now I have told you how I began: first with my 'thoughts', the stories that came apparently out of nowhere when I was in bed at night; then by telling them and by writing them – by keeping a diary, writing letters, reading – and, of course, by enjoying all my English lessons at school – yes, even the grammar lessons which showed me how a sentence is made, and how it can be shaped in the best way. You must do the same if you want to be a writer.

But now you will say, 'Yes, I see how you prepared yourself for writing, Miss Blyton – but how did you get going? Did your family help you? What happened?'

That, I think, must come into another chapter. It's not very important, but it might be interesting to you.

10
Struggling along

You perhaps think that my family knew I was meant to be a story-teller, and encouraged my gift to the utmost. No. They didn't even know that I *wanted* to write, nor did they know that I could. And, if you are a child, and not very sure of yourself, you can't say, 'But I *know* I must write, it's the one thing I like doing best of all!' People would merely think you very conceited and tiresome, and it would make things worse.

What made it all more difficult for me was the fact that my family thought I had another gift, not the gift for writing at all. They thought that my gift, quite definitely, was music.

Music is in my family. I have an aunt who has always been a brilliant musician and is still. I was continually told that I resembled this aunt in looks, and that I had her gift for music.

My father also was intensely fond of music. One of the things I remember most clearly about my childhood is lying in bed at night, and hearing my father playing Beethoven's sonatas, Chopin's nocturnes and ballades, grand pieces from Liszt and Rachmaninov, and a great deal of Mozart. I knew them by heart through listening to them night after night.

And now, whenever I hear those same pieces of music played, I seem to be back in my little bed, almost asleep, hearing my father playing hour after hour downstairs, all those years ago.

When you are a child you believe what you are told, so I believed that I must make music my career. I started learning the piano at six years old, and I found it easy – but that didn't mean that therefore I must develop into a genius!

I loved music. I loved hearing it and I loved playing. If I could have composed I would have been perfectly happy to take up music for the rest of my life. But I was not a composer. I could only interpret other people's music, and I wanted to create something of my own – not music, but books.

Still, I enjoyed learning sonatas and nocturnes and all the rest. I liked Bach best of all. Year after year I worked solidly through all the music exams. And when I was seventeen I was spending four hours a day on music. I didn't want to. I wanted to spend more time on writing. But it is almost impossible to ask to give up something that you have done all your life long and that everyone expects you to do. It is a terrible thing to tell your parents that you

want to throw away all the money they have spent on you and your future career.

For some time I had been writing all kinds of things, hoping to get them printed. I felt that if only I could get something printed perhaps it might be possible to go to my parents and say: 'See – I have something printed already. Need I go on with music?'

When I was about fourteen a famous writer for children, called Arthur Mee, whose books you may have read, ran a poem competition for children in one of his magazines. I loved writing poetry, so I sent in a poem. To my utter amazement and delight, I had a letter back from the great man himself. He liked my poem. He would print it. But more than that, he told me that he liked the letter I had sent with it.

'You can write,' he said. 'Send in other things to our page. Perhaps one day you will *really* write.'

That was a wonderful thing to me, but it didn't mean very much to my parents, of course. 'Arthur Mee is a kind fellow,' they said, 'he probably says the same thing to many children, to encourage them. Don't get big ideas into your head.'

All the same, when my little poem was printed on the children's page in the magazine I could have cried for joy! My words seemed quite different when they were *printed*, not written – they seemed so much more important. I was so grateful to Mr Arthur Mee that I promptly put him into my prayers at night. He never knew that, of course, but being the understanding, kindly man that he was he would probably have been pleased.

All through my teens I wrote and wrote and wrote – everything I could think of! Poems, stories, articles, even a novel. I couldn't stop writing and I loved every minute of it.

But alas – except for one unexpected acceptance of a poem by a magazine then called *Nash's Magazine*, nothing was successful. Day after day the manuscripts came back, and slid through the letter-box with a thud I came to know only too well.

As you might expect, my family thought it was a great waste of money on my part to go on buying paper and big envelopes, and stamps to send out things that always came back. I had to put a stamp on the addressed envelope for the return of the story or poem, of course, and I hadn't much money in those days. Children then were not allowed as much pocket money as they are now, and my father didn't approve of us having very much to spend.

I was often in despair. Was I too young? Was my writing foolish and worthless? Was music really my gift and *not* writing?

I *was* too young, of course. You need experience of many kinds before you can really write anything worthwhile. Nevertheless it was all good practice for me.

I didn't like being teased because my work always and invariably came back. My family recognized those long envelopes just as quickly as I did, when they arrived on the front door mat with their usual ominous thud. 'Another one back!' they would say. 'Why do you go on? It's a waste of time and money.'

I thought possibly they were right. Grown-ups have a

habit of being right about so many things. But how could I help wanting to write whatever came into my head? If an idea came to me I was uncomfortable and unsettled till I got it out of my mind and saw it safely down on paper. I am like that still. If an idea suddenly bobs up from my imagination, and dangles itself enticingly before me, I know I shall not rest till I have taken it and put it down on paper, whether it is a poem, a play, or a book. It worries at me till it is safely born.

In the end I was so ashamed of all my things being rejected and sent back that I used to creep down early in the morning and collect my poor long envelopes from the front door mat before anyone else was up.

But I never once thought of giving up. Not even when someone wrote some sound advice in my autograph album, which she hoped I would take! I'll tell you what it was.

'Be good, sweet maid, and let who can be clever; *do* noble things, not dream them all day long!'

Sound advice – but not for me. I certainly wanted to do noble things, but I wanted to dream them first, to find them in my imagination and bring them to life with my pen. But I certainly didn't 'dream them all day long'. I was the usual lively girl, loving games and pranks, enjoying everything to the full.

I found one or two other bits of advice that suited me better. I was reading Shakespeare at the time, and I came to these words:

> *'We fail!*
> *But screw your courage to the sticking-place,*
> *And we'll not fail!'*

Now that just suited my feelings at the time! Possibly I had had about six literary efforts sent back to me that week with the usual curt but polite note of rejection. Maybe I was feeling at my wits' end – was I striving after a goal that wasn't really mine? And then I read that curious little bit of advice about screwing up your courage to the sticking-point. I took it for my own at once, and I cannot tell you how many times I have used it since.

Another little quotation that I liked was this one:

> '*He shoots higher that threatens the moon,*
> *than he that aims at a tree!*'

That's a little like 'Hitch your wagon to a star', but I preferred the idea of aiming at something to that of being towed along. I always wanted to have to struggle for success, to get it without help, without 'pulling strings', without hitching myself to somebody else's kind offers of help. 'Enid's too independent!' How often did I hear that said in my young days! Perhaps I was – but still, I had to 'do my own shooting' whether at the moon or at a tree. I didn't want to reach success on anyone else's shoulders. It is partly the struggle that helps you so much, that gives you determination, character, self-reliance – all things that help in any profession or trade, and most certainly in writing.

If any grown-up reads this book, he will stop here and say 'she is moralising'. But I am not writing this for grown-ups. I am writing for you, the children, who are going through many of the experiences that I went through and

are groping in the dark at times, as I did. You want a hand held out to you sometimes from a grown-up you trust, and that is what I am always ready to do for you.

Well, to cut a long story short, I had no success at all at the beginning. I had at least five hundred things sent back to me, and on only one of them was there even a personal note. This one was a humorous poem (or so I thought!) and I had absurdly and boldly sent it to *Punch* (aiming at the moon, you see!).

The usual self-addressed envelope came back. I opened it. There was my poem – but written at the side was a sentence or two in a small, neat handwriting.

'Idea good. Spoilt by wrong accent in line 10, and bad rhyme in line 12. Try again sometime.'

It was signed O.S., the initials of Owen Seaman, the then famous editor of *Punch*. I stared at the magic initials as if I had been struck by lightning. He had actually bothered to read my poem himself and scribble advice – he had asked me to try again!

Little things like that mean a great deal to a young and eager writer. I know now that kindly Owen Seaman had a habit of scribbling a few words on most writers' efforts. One of the signs of real greatness is the willingness to spare an extra minute or two to help someone else, however busy one is, and sometimes that little kindly deed has an effect out of all proportion to the deed itself. I know that it galvanized me into all sorts of doings!

I bought books on the technique of poetry – 'prosody' as it is called. I was ashamed to find that I didn't know how to write poetry properly at all, according to these books. I

began to realize how important it was to read books on one's work. I determined to read every book I could on the Art of Writing, and also to read the lives of famous authors to see if they would help me. I went in for difficult literary competitions to sharpen my wits and my pen. I didn't win many prizes though, except for reviewing books. Yes, Owen Seaman's little note set quite a lot of things in motion as far as I was concerned.

And did I 'try again' as he advised me to? Yes, of course I did, but not for a long time did I get anything accepted by *Punch*.

But alas! I had no definite success in my writing that I could show to my parents, saying: 'Look! This is what I want to do! Let me write, don't make me take up music, now that I am leaving school.'

It looked as if I had 'shot at the moon' but hadn't even hit a tree! What in the world was I going to do about it?

11
A momentous day

It was the summer holidays. My father had entered me for the Guildhall of Music for the following September. I was working for the exam called L.R.A.M., and the last year had been filled with piano practice, study of harmony, and singing.

I went to spend part of the holiday on a farm. There, every Sunday, I went off to teach in the Sunday school with a trained kindergarten teacher with whose family I was staying.

I told stories – Bible stories – to a class of wide-eyed, listening children. I loved it. I loved the children, of course, I loved the teaching too, and the telling of stories in my own way. I drew and painted big pictures for the Sunday school wall. I helped in the craft work the children often did in that well-run and interesting Sunday school.

And then, quite suddenly, I knew what I ought to do. I

knew it without a single doubt. I wanted to be a writer for children, I knew that very well – but I wasn't getting anywhere in my writing. There was no training for that either, because I had made enquiries. I was up against a blank wall – I must get to my goal in some other way.

And, as I said, I suddenly knew the way to go. I must train as a kindergarten teacher, of course! I would then be with children all day long, I would hear them talk, see the things they did, find out exactly what they liked and disliked, what they feared, what they longed for. I would see naughty children and good children, and I would learn what the children wanted to read!

I could write all the time I was training! I could try out my stories and poems and plays on the children themselves. They should be my critics. If they disliked something it should be torn up at once. If they delighted in something, then I should know I was on the right lines. You know yourselves, children, that if a story bores you, your mind refuses it – you skip, you throw the book aside. Adults are the same, of course. But if you love a story, how you revel in it, how your imagination lights up, how easily you enter into the minds and feelings of the characters in the book!

Ah yes, I thought – this is the thing to do – live with children all day long, and write every conceivable thing for them that I can. I won't listen when the *grown-ups* tell me what children like – how do *they* know? I will listen to the children themselves. I love them, and I will get as close to their minds and thoughts and hearts as I can.

A wonderful plan – but how was I to throw up all my parents' plans, refuse to take up music, and go in for quite a

different career? When you are eighteen, and feel fairly grown-up, you realize that there are other things to be considered besides your own wishes. I didn't want to upset my parents.

There was only one thing to do – face up to it, as my father had often told me to do. So I went down to the village telephone box, and put in enough money for a long-distance call. I felt that I couldn't sit down and write a letter. It would be so agonizing to have to wait for an answer.

And so I made a momentous telephone call that completely altered my life. My father was astounded. He couldn't believe his ears. What! I was suggesting that I should give up my musical career – that he should cancel my entry into the music world – that I should become a kindergarten teacher!

And over the telephone too! 'How like you, Enid, to tell me these things over the *telephone*! Why must you be so headstrong? I must think about it. No, I can't give you an answer now. Why, I didn't even know you *liked* teaching!

'I do,' I said. 'I love it. And please, do give me an answer now. I've got all the particulars of the Froebel training for students, and I must enter straight away if I'm going to. I have to send in the form tomorrow. Please, if you love me, let me do this. I don't WANT to take up music. I love it, but that isn't enough. Please say yes. You can think about it afterwards.'

My father began to laugh. I could hear it clearly over the telephone even at that distance. I can hear the chuckling noise now, as a matter of fact. I was so keyed up that

everything that I heard or saw in those few minutes was registered in my mind like a vivid photograph.

I knew I had won when I heard that laugh. My father had a real sense of humour, and I often amused him, and though he sometimes railed against them, I think that secretly he liked my independence and 'headstrong' decisions. He probably recognized the same things in himself!

'So I'm to say yes, but think about it afterwards!' he said. 'All right. Go your own way. At least it will put the idea of being a writer out of your head, and teaching is a fine profession. Send me the papers to sign. Goodbye!'

I put down the receiver and found that I was trembling. My knees used to shake as a child, when I was frightened or upset, and they were shaking now! I couldn't believe it. I had got my way – my father did not sound too angry, or too upset. I was filled with gratitude and love. Ah – *now* I would write to him – a letter he would like to get!

But then something he had said suddenly struck me. He had said: 'At least it will put the idea of being a writer out of your head.' It wouldn't, of course. I was going to train as a teacher because I wanted to know exactly how and what to write for children later on. Would he mind if he knew that? Would he mind if he knew that I was going to train as a teacher because I saw in it a certain road to writing for children?

I puzzled over my father's surprising and sudden consent. He had always been so certain I must take up music. It wasn't until sometime afterwards that I learnt a

curious fact which, knowing my father, I guessed had an effect on his decision to let me have my way.

He studied every science that interested him, big or small. One of the things he was always curious about was the science of phrenology. Do you know what that is? It is what is popularly called 'feeling our bumps'.

A phrenologist asserts that, by running his sensitive hands over your skull, and feeling the various 'bumps' here and there, he can tell you what gifts you have and what you are likely to be successful in. I had my 'bumps' felt by a phrenologist when I was eight years old. I remember it quite well.

'Don't say anything in front of the child,' my father said to the man, who was quite bald and had about the bumpiest head I had ever seen in my life. 'You can give me a written report.'

I didn't see the report until years later. Then one day my mother showed it to me. She had unearthed it with a lot of old papers. I read it with interest.

'Your father was disappointed in it,' Mother said. 'He was so sure that you were a musical genius that he was certain your bumps would prove it, young as you were. But they didn't!'

They certainly didn't. Music was not even mentioned in the report! Nor, I may say, was writing. But what the phrenologist insisted on very strongly was that I was a born *teacher*. 'This child will turn to teaching as she develops,' the report said. 'It is and will be her great gift.'

And, mainly because of that expressed opinion of the bald-headed phrenologist all those years ago, my father

gave up his idea of a musical career for me, and said yes – I could train as a teacher! That old report had puzzled him, because he believed in 'bump-reading'. And yet it hadn't said anything about music, but had insisted on teaching as my career. And lo and behold, at the threshold of my adult life, I had telephoned suddenly and with conviction, saying that I wanted to throw up music and meant to be a teacher!

My father remembered that puzzling old 'bump-reading report', and capitulated suddenly and surprisingly on the telephone. He was always big enough to change his mind when he thought he was wrong, and he changed it in half a second then. How grateful I felt to that long-ago phrenologist! He was wrong, of course – writing is my career, with a love for teaching to help it, so why he thought I had such a wonderful bump for teaching I don't know. Maybe I had bumped against a door or a table, and raised a lump somewhere on my head!

Things went smoothly after that. I took up my training. I loved every minute of it. I was a round peg in a round hole. I taught, I told stories, I played for the children to sing, I prepared their craft work, I listened to all they said, I was as close to them as I could be.

I wrote all the time. There were children aged three to ten in my group – kindergarten, transition, first form and second. I had plenty of boys and girls to try out my ideas on! I couldn't have enough of the children. They were more interesting to me than anything else in the world, just as they are now.

I found that my training in nature was immensely useful. I had it all at my finger-tips! An aquarium? Yes, I

could make that. A wormery? Of course. A bird-table? Nothing easier!

Again, my love for folk-tales and for old myths and legends was useful too. I clothed them in new words for the children, I found that they liked the straightforward, simple way of telling a story, they loved plenty of excitement but shrank away from anything frightening or horrible. They loved a comical story, they adored tales about children like themselves – and how delighted they were to have animals in their stories! They were very strict about the morals – if any character in a tale did something wrong, he had to be punished, and they didn't mind thinking up punishments for him themselves! And, of course, anyone who was kind or generous in the tale had to be rewarded. So, you see, the children I first told my stories to were really like you!

You wouldn't be very interested in my three years' training as a Froebel kindergarten teacher, so I will get on to my next chapter.

But I must just say this – that if any of you ever have the same idea as I had, of writing for children, not for adults, then you must be with children day in and day out, and get as close to them as you can.

It was the children themselves who taught me how to write for boys and girls. No adult can teach you that as well as they can. And even now you still teach me many, many things. I learn from your letters, from meeting you when I lecture or talk, and from watching you wherever I go.

To be a writer for children is certainly a never-ending job!

12

How I write my books

This is a chapter that many of you will already know, because I have so often told you, in my Autographing Afternoons, exactly how I write my books. But although hundreds of you, perhaps thousands, have heard me tell this, there are still many thousands who would like to know. So I had better put this chapter in!

Now – how do I write my books? How do I think of my stories? I will tell you from the beginning, and try to explain clearly.

First of all, I must tell you that there are two distinct ways of writing a book.

Some authors like to think out the whole story or plot carefully, and make notes of it – a kind of short summary. They think out their characters, and note them down – names, characteristics, colour of eyes, hair, and so on. They think out the setting for their story and may make a plan of

the house or garden or countryside they are going to write about. They may even write out a list of the chapters and what they are going to put into them.

Other authors make out no list at all, nor do they make any notes. They invent nothing beforehand. They could not possibly tell you what was going to happen in their books. They draw their story completely from their imagination. It may come out with ease or with difficulty, but it comes, not from the author's conscious mind or deliberate invention, but from his imagination, or, as some people put it, from his subconscious, his 'under-mind', the place where his dreams come from.

Now, as a rule you can tell, when you read a book, whether the author is of the first or second kind. Children can usually tell at once, and I have found that most children as a rule prefer those authors who depend on their imagination rather than on their invention. I think this is why such books as *Alice in Wonderland* are successful. There is something natural and spontaneous and convincing about that kind of book that no amount of conscious and careful invention could produce. It is, as someone once said, 'utterly readable'.

I don't think it really matters much which kind of author one is. Both kinds produce good books, but perhaps those who depend solely on their imaginative powers have more verve and liveliness in their stories, and it is often impossible to put down their books until we have finished them. But anyway, if one is an author, one cannot help being born as one kind or the other! It is something that the writer himself cannot alter.

As most of you know, I am the second kind. I could not possibly *invent* a plot or characters and write them down before I began a book. As for planning out my chapters, that would be impossible too – I don't even know what the book will be about till I begin it!

Now let me try to tell you how I set to work. You will remember that I told you about my night-time 'thoughts' – and how these strange 'thoughts', as I used to call them, came flooding into my mind, weaving themselves into stories of all kinds. All I had to do was to lie still with my eyes closed and let the stories come. I saw them all in my mind's eye as they unfolded.

I did not *think* these stories, as we think out a problem, or ponder over something. They came all ready made, as it were, pouring out complete. Whatever characters there were in the story I could see clearly in my mind's eye and, for the time being, the story was real to me. I was pleased or sad, afraid or delighted, as the story unfolded in my mind.

And it is in exactly the same way that I find my stories now. If I sit in my chair and shut my eyes for a minute or two, in comes the story I am waiting for, all ready and complete in my imagination.

I sit in my chair and think, 'Now today I am going to begin a new book. What shall it be? Adventure? Circus? Nature? Fairy-tale? Mystery? I think it is time for a fairy-tale! A fairy-tale it shall be!'

I have to find two things when I write a book. I have to find my characters, of course, and the setting for the story – the place where everything happens. So I shut my eyes, and I look into my mind's eye.

You know what that is, don't you? We all have one. When I talk to children in public, I show them each their mind's eye. I say: 'Now – shut your eyes for a minute – keep them shut. Now, while they are shut, think of Father Christmas! Think of him – now open your eyes.'

The children all open their eyes and look at me. Then I say: 'Now, when I said to you, "Think of Father Christmas," you saw him, didn't you? You saw him clearly – red suit, red hood, round red jolly face, white beard and all. Well, you used your *mind's eye* to see him. He's not really here, but you saw him for that minute!'

Now, I use my mind's eye the whole time when I write a story. It is almost as if I am looking out of a window, or at a private cinema screen inside my head, and see my characters there – and what I see, I write down.

Let us say I am going to write my first Faraway Tree Story. You all know the Faraway Tree books, I expect. Well, I sit in my chair, shut my eyes and wait till my characters appear in my mind's eye. Remember, I don't know who or what they will be! There are always children, of course, or something to do with the world of children.

Then, as I sit still and look into my mind's eye, my characters appear. What do I see? Yes – three children, and I know their names – Jo, Bessie and Fanny! They stand there in my mind's eye and I can see them as clearly as I see you when I look at you. I can see if they are tall or short, dark or fair, fat or thin. And more than that, in some queer way I see into their characters too. I know if they are kind or unkind, hot-tempered, generous, amusing, or deceitful! They stand there complete before me, exactly as they

would in real life, and I can see every single detail of them. I do not have to invent anything, either in their appearance or their character. They appear complete.

Well – not quite complete. For some strange reason no child ever appears in my mind's eye with a surname as well as a Christian name. I know their Christian names at once – but never their surnames. I have to confess that when I want those I go and look up suitable names in the telephone directory.

As I look at my new characters, Jo, Bessie and Fanny, they seem to come alive. They move and laugh and talk – they are real to me now. They will be with me all the time I write my book.

And now, having found my characters, I must find my 'setting'. This is important too. Adventures cannot happen without characters to experience them, and a place to happen in! So, once again, I look steadfastly into my mind's eye, and the setting appears.

What do I see? I see a dark, mysterious wood – the Enchanted Wood! The trees whisper 'wisha-wisha-wisha' as I look into the wood. I am excited. This is a strange and thrilling setting. Anything might happen here!

I look at the Enchanted Wood and I see a little winding path running between the trees. Where does it lead to? My imagination tells me at once! In my mind's eye I follow that path, and come at last to the heart of the wood. There I see a tree – a giant of a tree, a most enormous tree whose branches touch the clouds!

And I know what it is – it is the strange Faraway Tree, a tree that touches the sky, and is the home of little folk. I

had never heard of it, or seen it till that moment – but there it is, complete in every detail.

As I look at it, I see little folk climbing up and down the tree – and what a strange sight, here comes a little washing-basket, let down from high up the tree! A little squirrel jumps in, with a red jersey on his plump body. 'This story is going to be interesting,' I say to myself. 'But perhaps I had better have a close look at this tree in my mind's eye, because people live in it – and they will come into the story too.'

So up the tree I go. I pass a little window and I am just going to peep in when someone calls out sharply: 'Don't peep! The Angry Pixie lives there and he doesn't like people who peep. He throws things at them!'

'Dear me,' I think, 'how peculiar!' I don't peep, but go on up the tree. I pass another window and I do peep this time – and I see a little owl fast asleep with a red nightcap on his head. Up I go and come to a little yellow door – how very exciting. Who lives there? I really must know. So I knock.

The door flies open – and there stands a pixie with a cloud of silky yellow hair round her pretty little face. It's Silky the pixie, and I look at her in delight and feel pleased that she is going to be in my book.

I go up a little higher, and suddenly hear a curious noise – a watery, slishy-sloshy sort of noise. *You* know what it is, of course, because you know the story – but you must remember that this is the first time *I* have seen the Faraway Tree, and I haven't any idea what the curious noise is.

Down the tree comes a waterfall of soapy water! I only

just get out of the way in time. Somebody calls out to me: 'Look out – that's Dame Washalot's washing water! It's her washing-day today and she's been emptying her soapy water down the tree. She always does.'

I wonder then how many people in my new book are going to be caught by Dame Washalot's washing water! Up I go, feeling rather cautious, and I see an old man sitting in a deck-chair, fast asleep, on a broad bough. His mouth is wide open. I know his name as I look at him – Mister Watzisname – and I am perfectly certain that *some*body in the story is going to pop something into his open mouth. And then there will be trouble!

Now I am almost at the top of the tree. There is another door there – and before I can knock, it is opened, and there stands a round, red-faced, twinkling-eyed little fellow, beaming at me. I know who it is, though I have never in my life seen him before. It is Moonface, of course. How pleased I am that he is going to be in my story too!

I go into his little house. How strange it is! It is inside the trunk of the great tree, and all the furniture is curved to fit round the trunk. And then I see a most curious thing.

There is a hole right in the very middle of the floor. What can it be for? How dangerous! And then I suddenly know all about it! It is the entrance to a slippery-slip that goes from the top of the tree to the bottom – a wonderful short cut, of course! You sit on one of Moonface's cushions, he gives you a push, and down you go at top speed, round and round and round – and shoot out through a little trapdoor at the foot of the tree, and land on a soft cushion of moss.

A very fine idea! I couldn't have thought of that myself in a month of Sundays – and yet I saw the whole thing there in my mind's eye, complete even to the little pattern on each of Moonface's cushions! 'The children will like that,' I think to myself. 'I like it myself!'

And then I go to the door of Moonface's house and peer out again. I can hear a strange noise – a jingling-jangling, clinking-clanking noise. What is it? Ah yes, *you* know, because you have read the book. But at that moment the story hasn't even been written yet, so I don't know. I have to look and see what makes the noise.

I see a funny little fellow coming up the tree. He is hung all about with pots and pans and kettles. He wears a saucepan for a hat, and he sings a silly little song as he comes – I can hear it plainly:

'Two dogs in a kennel,
Two pigs in a sty,
Two cats on a cushion,
Hi-tiddly-hie!'

That is the first time I have ever heard the old Saucepan Man's silly songs. I shall hear many more as I write the story! I don't make them up – I simply hear them and write them down. I don't think I could possibly invent such silly songs as Saucepan does!

'Hallo, Saucepan,' says Moonface. 'Let's go to the top of the tree and see what's there today.'

I want to see too – and in my mind's eye I see Moonface and Saucepan climb up to the topmost branch of the Faraway Tree, and I follow. A little yellow ladder stretches

surprisingly from the last branch, up through a purple hole in the cloud that lies on the top of the tree.

Up the ladder – and through the cloud – and now I catch my breath as I poke my head out through the top of the hole. Why! There is a strange land here – a land I don't know! Is it the Land of Secrets, the Land of Birthdays, the Land of Spells? I just don't know.

But I do suddenly know something very clearly. I know that my new book is going to be about three children called Jo, Bessie and Fanny – and they are going to visit the Enchanted Wood and find the Faraway Tree. They are going to make friends with all the little folk who live in the tree – and with them they are going to have the most amazing adventures in the strange Lands that come to the top of the tree each week.

'*Now* I know what my story is to be about!' I say, and I open my eyes. My hands go up to the typewriter on my knee, and I begin: 'Once upon a time ...'

But now you will say: 'Wait a minute, Enid Blyton! You've forgotten something! You've told us how you get your characters and how you find your setting – but you haven't told us the most important thing of all! How do you *think* of your stories? How do you *know* what's going to happen? Where do you get all the adventures from?'

13

How the story comes

Where *do* I get all the adventures from? I don't know. I don't know any more than you do. That is the strange part, the part I can't really explain, the part that seems almost like magic. I don't know what the adventures are going to be! And yet, day after day, my fingers fly over my typewriter, and I fill the pages with queer, exciting or comical adventures without ceasing.

The only way I can partly explain it is by using the 'private cinema screen' idea I spoke of a few pages back. It is as if I were watching a story being unfolded on a bright screen. Characters come and go, talk and laugh, things happen to them, the Saucepan Man sings his silly songs, the slippery-slip is used, the children visit amazing Lands at the top of the tree – the whole story sparkles on my private 'screen' inside my head, and I simply put down what I see and hear.

The story comes out complete and whole from beginning to end. I do not have to stop and think for one moment. If I tried to think out or invent the whole book, as some writers do, I could not do it. For one thing it would bore me, and for another it would lack the vigour and the extraordinary touches and surprising ideas that flood out from my imagination. People in my books make jokes I could never have thought of myself. I am merely a sightseer, a reporter, an interpreter, whatever you like to call me.

The only thing that is mine where the book is concerned, is that it is *my* imagination that has supplied every word. Although it is something beyond myself, bigger than I am, it is still mine. I cannot alter it in any way, but I *can* supply it with more and more facts to feed on; I *can* make the road to it easy to travel, so that at any moment I can open the way from my imagination to my conscious mind, and can put into written words the stories and fantasies that come flooding out when I fling wide the gates.

It is open to all writers to enrich their imagination and to make it easy of access. The more one observes and hears and learns, the more one reads (and that is very important), the more one ponders and muses *consciously* on this, that and the other, the richer the imagination becomes. Can you understand that? I hope so, because I am not only writing this particular chapter for you *now*, but so that you may remember it when you are grown-up, and need a mind packed full of good things.

Some writers find it difficult to open the gates to their imagination. You know how I do it – by shutting my eyes,

letting my mind go blank, and then looking in my mind's eye for what I am seeking. I find it easy because the gates were open from my earliest childhood, and much practice has meant that they can be swung open now at my slightest touch.

Some writers, particularly those that have to *invent* their stories instead of leaving them to the imagination, work very slowly. A book may take them six months or a year. Those who use their imagination are much quicker than those who have to invent, but even so some imaginative writers are much quicker at their work than others.

I am very lucky. I have such easy access to my imagination, and the flood of ideas pours out so fast and so furiously that it is all I can do to type quickly enough to keep up with them. It is a help, of course, to be able to handle words with pleasure and ease, and to know exactly what words to use. But the *speed* of a writer's work depends entirely on the force, vigour and swiftness of his imagination.

He has to work at the pace of his imagination. If it is a powerful one he is impelled to work quickly. He cannot do otherwise. If his imagination is not so easy to get at, and ideas merely trickle out, then he will write slowly. You can see this happening when your teacher sets your class a story to write, or asks you to describe something that happened in your holiday.

Some children write a few words and stop. Their minds' eyes are completely blank. Their imagination, their memory, cannot supply them quickly with what they want. But other children will speed along, their pens hardly

able to keep up with what they are thinking.

As a rule, children who read a lot can write more easily and better than children who read little. They know how to handle words, and their minds are well supplied with facts and fancies because of what they have read. Also, observant children find it easier to write than unobservant ones – they can usually find plenty to say. I wonder which kind of child *you* are!

The luckiest authors are those who have been gifted with an imagination that is easy to get at, and one that is powerful and fertile. There is little hard labour attached to their work. Indeed, it can hardly be called work. It is a delight and a pleasure, and these writers are not happy unless they can work at their books whenever they want to.

I could write a whole book at one sitting if only I didn't have to eat or sleep. When I begin a book, I know it is complete and whole in my imagination, that every detail will be there, and that beginning, middle and end are already prepared, so that the story moves off swiftly, grows and develops, and will round itself off satisfactorily at the end. The exciting thing to me is the development of the story. As I don't know myself what will be in the book I am in the happy position of writing and reading a new story at one and the same time!

It is easy for a writer with a powerful and practised imagination to write ten or twelve thousand words in a day. I could write much more if only my arms didn't get tired of being poised over my typewriter.

If you could lock me up into a room for two, three or four days, with just my typewriter and paper, some food

and a bed to sleep in when I was tired, I could come out from that room with a book finished and complete, a book of, say, sixty thousand words. I would not be tired at the end of it because I should have used my imagination, as distinct from my brain. Brain work *is* tiring. Using one's imagination is not.

A book like this one I am writing for you now does not come from my imagination, of course, but from my conscious mind. I think of what I write. I have deliberately planned this book for you. Therefore I am writing it slowly, because *I* am in command, and not my imagination. A nature book is much the same. It is mainly composed of facts, and these cannot be left to the imagination. So some of my books, those that are not 'stories', are written just as you, for instance, would write an essay on something you had learnt in your geography lesson. You would use your brain and your memory, not your imagination.

These last chapters may have been difficult for you to understand, and it doesn't matter in the least if you skipped some of the pages. I have really written them for two kinds of children – those who long to write themselves, and have probably begun already – and those who ask me insistently, whenever they see me: 'Miss Blyton, *how* do you write your books?'

Well, now you know!

14

Why I write so many books

One thing that always puzzles the grown-ups but, as far as I know, has never puzzled you children, is why I write so many books – and so many different kinds.

Now, most authors like one age of children best – perhaps six years old, or ten, or thirteen. So they write for their favourite age, and that age only. Let us say that an author prefers the age of six. Very well – the child arrives at six years old, that author's books are given to him, and he reads them and loves them. When you were small you probably read some of Beatrix Potter's enchanting animal books – but when you grew a little older, and were no longer six years old, you didn't read her books any more. There were no more of them to read, because she only wrote for very young children.

Other authors prefer to write for much older children. They have no interest in the younger ones, and would

probably write boring books for them if they went outside the age-range they have chosen – which is, say, teenage. But you children then have to wait for years before you are of the age to read that author.

Now, I like every single age of child there is. I like babies, of course, and toddlers – but when the child is between two and three years old I think it is time he had stories told to him. I did so love stories when I was little and I never had enough of them. I love writing stories for the tinies, so I begin with them at about three years old – though sometimes parents tell me that their two-year-olds love to listen to simple stories.

But I don't want to stop at three-year-olds! I like you just as much when you are five and six – and just as much when you are nine and ten, and in your teens. In fact, as I said, I like every single age of child there is. I want to know you from the very beginning, and go with you all through your childhood till you are old enough to read adult books. I don't want you to be friends with me at one age only, I want to keep in touch with you all through your childhood days.

And so I write for you from the time you first begin to like stories, right up to the day when you turn to adult books.

So many different ages! How different the three-year-old's mind is from the seven-year-old's. And how different the ten-year-old is from the thirteen-year-old! You use different language, you think different things, your likes and dislikes change from age to age.

It doesn't matter. I know the language a three-year-old

understands, and I know the things he wants to read about. I know quite well that later on he will want more advanced words and longer sentences and stories, and later on still he will want long books with exciting adventures, and mysteries, books in which he can use his brains. I like you all, at any age, so it is easy to write the right language and right kind of books for every one of you.

I won't bore you with the different kinds of books that are suitable for all your different ages, because you know them as well as I do. That is why I am very glad you children go to the bookshops as you do, look round them, decide which kind of book you like the best, know the names of your authors and their books, and ask for what you want.

Well, to come back to what I was talking about – one of the reasons I write so many books is, as I said, because I like to write for all the different ages of childhood. But there is another reason too.

My mind has always been a restless, ever-working one. I want to try everything. I wanted to write nature books and I wanted to write adventure stories. I felt that I must write fairy-tales, and I must also write annuals, because you love them so much. I couldn't help writing farm stories, because I love farm life, and it was impossible not to write school stories, especially when my own children went to school.

Then I felt that I must write circus stories. I loved the circus so much when I was a child. I do still, of course. I went behind the scenes once and I have never forgotten it. I was about nine years old then, and after that a great many of the 'night-thoughts' that came to me were about the

circus. Before long my imagination had created a whole circus – and so naturally, when I grew up and wanted to write, one of the things I found it easy to do was to write books about circuses.

I wanted to write 'home stories' too – books about families and how they get on together – like *House-at-the-Corner* and *Those Dreadful Children*. I felt that I must try my hand at detective stories, where the children themselves are detectives – and so the Mystery series began, with Fatty, Larry, Pip, Bets and Mr Goon in it.

Oddly enough, you liked them all. If I happened to write two books about the same characters, in came floods of letters, saying that it *must* be a series, when was the third one coming out? How you do love books about the same characters, don't you? I do myself.

Then I also wanted to write religious books. I used to pore over the life of Christ, as a child, and how I wished that someone would come along and tell me the stories in an easier way – a way that a child would understand. There were so many things that puzzled me, and grown-ups were not always very good at explaining things. I heard a great deal in sermons and at Sunday school but so much seemed above my head.

And so I felt that I must write religious books too. I must tell the story of Christ so simply and clearly that even the youngest child would understand every word, and would see Jesus as a real, living person – someone who loved children, and who could tell the most wonderful stories in the world.

I wanted to teach children how to pray, and I have

written a book about that too. Prayer is a most important thing, and, alas, thousands of parents nowadays don't teach their children this, and don't even know how to. So I thought I must. I can't leave anything out, as far as you are concerned, especially something that might help you.

I wanted to teach you how to garden, because I loved it so much myself, and I knew how children longed to have a patch of their own. But they ought to know how to work it properly or they will be disappointed in it, and so I had to write you a book on gardening.

There was no end to the kinds of books I wanted to write, which I knew you needed or would love to have. What did it matter if it was hard work, I loved every minute!

I also wanted to write you reading books, for your lessons. That was easy, because I was a trained teacher and I knew exactly what you should know, and how to tell it in the way that would interest you. The odd thing is that I have written books for teachers too – but *you* buy them for yourselves! The *Book of the Year* was meant for teachers to use, but you buy it and pore over it yourselves! I believe if I wrote a book on How to Sweep Chimneys you would buy it and pore over it as usual! I would really like to write a novel for adults – but I can't because I know you would borrow it and read it.

I like to know what you want. You often tell me in your letters, of course. You know better than anyone else what you want to read about, and you are the people I listen to. I think most children's authors listen to their readers now, though in my childhood days they rarely did. You tell us

clearly what you want most, and dear me, how I set to work after I have made out a list of your requests!

'Another farm book, please!'

'A nature book – about birds, please, but you can put in animals too, if you like.'

'A new Secret Seven – no, *two* new Secret Sevens, Miss Blyton!'

'More Mysteries! Another Malory Towers! Oh, and *don't* stop the Adventure series! And can we have another Little Noddy book?'

Well, I write down everything you want, as you know, and I look down the long list and I say, 'Children, I may not be able to write *all* these for you this year – but I do promise you this one – and that one – and that one. Now, surely you don't want me to work day and night for you, without any sleep at all?'

And, hard-hearted little creatures that you are, you always yell, 'YES!'

15

Grist to a writer's mill

In this chapter I want to tell you the kinds of things that helped me to write books – the things I packed into my mind, that sank down into my 'under-mind' and simmered there, waiting for the time to come when they would be needed again for a book – changed, transmuted, made perfect, finely-wrought – quite different from when they were packed away.

And yet the *essence* of them was exactly the same. Something had been at work, adapting, altering, deleting here and there, polishing brightly – but still the heart, the essence of the original thing was there, and I could almost always recognize it.

I have told you how I loved going to the circus, and how circuses have come to be the theme of many of my books. My imagination has produced, whole and complete, three different circuses, all of which you probably have read

about. I loved fairs too, and have packed many of those away in my mind for use in my books.

Then I packed down into my mind scores of different plays I saw acted on the stage. We lived only about six miles away from the old Crystal Palace when I was a child, and every week, if the play was suitable, my father and mother used to take me with them to the theatre there. How I loved those nights! All writers love going to the theatre, of course. There, the creations of the imagination come to life and, for a short space, are living and breathing. Wonderful!

My mind was soon packed with scores of plays. What did I see? Some that you can still see, of course, and others that are not acted now: *Maid of the Mountains*; *The Quaker Girl*; *Chu Chin Chow*; many Shakespeare plays; *Sherlock Holmes* – how I loved seeing him in a play! I held my breath so much in that play that my father thought there was something wrong with me.

'*I'd* like to write detective stories, too, when I grow up,' I told him. He laughed. Well, I *did* write detective stories – though not for adults, as Conan Doyle did, but for you.

I saw *Charley's Aunt*, and I really don't think I ever laughed so much in all my life. How proud I was when my father told me that the author was a relation of his! That made him a cousin of mine, too, I thought. I wished I could write funny plays like that – or even funny stories. How marvellous to make all that crowded theatre laugh in utter delight!

I saw pantomimes, of course, as you do, and children's plays – *Peter Pan* I saw some time ago with my own two

girls and, as you can imagine, we all shouted out that we believed in fairies! The small boy in front of me almost fell over the edge of the balcony, he was so determined to save Tinkerbell!

The circuses I saw paved the way for my circus books. The plays I revelled in paved the way for my many books of plays that some of you have acted in school. My nature rambles with my father were the beginning of all my nature books, and my love for my little garden made me think of writing gardening books. Everything has a beginning in the world of writing.

My school days, and then those of my children, filled my mind with stories and pranks, the memories of games of lacrosse, hockey and tennis, the little spites and deceits of school life, the loyalty and generosities and friendships, and the never-ending impact of one character on another, in the crowded school rooms. Out they all came pouring, when I wanted to write school stories for you. The schools in my books are a mixture of all the schools I have known – a bit of one, a piece of another, a chip of a third!

Sometimes you write to me and say, 'I am to go to school soon, and my mother says that if Malory Towers is real, she will send me there. *Do* say it is real. I badly want to go.'

And I wish I *could* say it was 'real' and that you could go there, and meet the girls you read of in the stories.

Such things as going off to the seaside, or staying on farms were just as much a delight to me as they are to you. Every shining, glittering moment was packed away complete into my memory, to be brought out and used

again in books about the seaside or country. Every voyage I have ever made was tucked away too, down to the smallest detail.

I have been to many countries and, like all writers, I never stop looking, listening, watching, pondering and remembering. I have travelled in the stately *Queen Elizabeth* to America, and in the older *Queen Mary* and, as you probably know, those ships are already in my books. I have voyaged over the seas in a snow-white steam-yacht, and that too is in a book. Sometimes I think that everything I have ever seen or heard is reflected in my books!

I have bought a shawl in the 'House of a Thousand Shawls' in Seville, and drunk mint tea in Marrakesh in Morocco. I have gone into smelly, picturesque bazaars in Casablanca, and bargained with a shrewd-eyed trader for a jar I had fallen in love with. I still have it.

I have watched flying-fish, and seen them flash brilliantly over the waves, and held my breath in delight. I have travelled in a bullock-sleigh over cobbled streets, cradled a tiny monkey in my arms in a sandy waste where only grotesque cactus bushes grew (do you remember Micky, the little hurt monkey in *The Ship of Adventure*? – that was the monkey!) and I have sat in an exiled king's magnificent palace on the top of a steep mountain in Portugal, marvelling at the great stretch of sunny countryside I could see.

And always, wherever I have been, whatever I have seen, great or small, I have said: 'I really must put that into a book!' If I see a tiny creature, such as the earwig, brooding

over its eggs, turning them to catch the sun, I think to myself: 'Why, it's a real mother! I must put that into a book!' And if I see something magnificent, such as a tremendous storm at sea, which sends the *Queen Mary* rolling till I feel that in one of her rolls she will never straighten up again, I gasp in fright: 'I must put this into a book!'

But when people say to me, as they often do: 'Miss Blyton, I have a marvellous plot for your next book,' I shake my head and say, 'I'm sorry! I have never been able to use anyone else's ideas, never in my life. If I try to use one, I find it is dead and cold – I cannot make it come to life.'

What else in my childhood helped me with my books? Well, religion, naturally. Did I go to church? Yes, twice every Sunday, morning and evening, and to choir practice on Thursday nights. I went to Sunday school in the afternoon, and if there was a prayer meeting we stayed on for that too.

Every year the Sunday School Union held a scripture exam, and I went in for it regularly. We had to study certain parts of the New Testament, and once, I remember, we were given the story of the little girl at Capernaum, the tale of Jairus's daughter, who died and was brought to life again by Jesus.

I loved that story. Do you know it? I brooded over it, developed it into a bigger tale, and relived it in my imagination. And, of course, I naturally had to write it, and make a book of it, when I was grown-up. In fact, all the Christian teaching I had, in church or Sunday school or

in my reading, has coloured every book I have written for you.

You don't really notice that, of course, because I am a storyteller, not a preacher – and yet most of you could write down perfectly correctly all the things that I believe in and stand for – you have found them in my books, and a writer's books are always a faithful reflection of himself. You cannot help knowing, too, whether you would *like* the writer or not, once you have read two or three of his books.

I once went to stay with my grandmother, who was a strict but kind old lady. A cousin was staying there with me, and when Sunday came he didn't want to go to church.

'I don't want to go,' he said to my grandmother. 'What's the use of going? Why must I keep on going every Sunday?'

'Your own mother has told you many a time why we go to church,' said my grandmother, shocked. 'But I'll give you another reason. Children who are brought up in the proper way never have their wishbones where their backbones ought to be!'

That was the first time I ever heard that peculiar saying and at first I didn't know what it meant. It meant, of course, that well-trained children are strong and dependable characters, with plenty of back-bone. But those who are not, are weak-willed and undependable – because instead of a sturdy backbone they have a wishbone that does no good! My grandmother was half Irish, and she had some amusing sayings. She told me a great many queer old Irish tales too, and I sometimes find her long-ago voice

whispering in my mind still, when I think of leprechauns or banshees!

Some people's lives are full and others' lives are incredibly empty. The restless, questing mind gathers an enormous amount of knowledge and experience and somehow attracts adventures to itself. I am lucky always to have had a full life: a life filled with people and things, with games and work, never-ending reading, nature-lore, music, theatres and, later on, teaching, writing, getting married, bringing up my own children, making my own gardens and ponds, caring for pets – and always, no matter what was happening, writing books, more books and yet more books.

All is grist that comes to a writer's mill – the smallest happening, the tiniest thought, the biggest adventure. Plenty of grist has come to my mill – and one of the best things I can wish you is that plenty may come to yours!

16

Which of my characters are real

And now, after those last chapters, which the younger ones may find difficult to understand, but which you older ones will grasp with ease, let us have something a little more amusing.

I will answer a question that bobs up every so often from one or another of you: 'Are any of the characters in your book *real*?'

A few of them are, but not many because, as I have told you, practically all my characters spring complete and whole from my imagination. But seven or eight are definitely 'real'.

Do you remember Mam'zelle in the St. Clare's school stories? Plump, amusing, hot-tempered, easy to play tricks on?

She was one of the French mistresses I had at school. I will not tell you her name because she doesn't know she is

in my books, and she might come all the way from France to say to me, as so often she used to say, '*Que vous êtes méchante, Enid! Que vous êtes abominable!*' (How naughty you are! What abominable behaviour!)

She did many of the things she does in the books. She flew into rages, she stamped and wailed aloud at our stupidity. She was terrified of bats, mice, beetles, bees and spiders. She hated to come near my desk because, being a nature-lover, I might quite well have a few silkworms there, or a tame stag-beetle.

We played tricks on her. Dear Mam'zelle, she was so easy to take in. We played many of the tricks I have described in my school books. We bought a big, artificial ink blob and placed it on her book. Her scream of horror was music in our ears!

We bought a peculiar rubber thing that made a noise like a mewing kitten, and poor Mam'zelle spent ages hunting in the cupboards for the lost animal. I spent all my pocket money for three weeks on a collection of six oblong sheets of tin, the size of playing cards. When I let them slide like cards from my hand to a stone floor, the noise was terrific. It sounded exactly like someone dropping a tray of dinner-things and smashing every one.

I had a wonderful collection of trick pencils. I kept them on my desk, ready for any unwary mistress to pick up. One pencil had a point made of rubber. When you tried to write with it, the point wobbled in a most astounding manner. Another pencil had a point that disappeared completely inside the pencil itself, when anyone tried to write with it. Another had a tin point that wouldn't write at all.

But the most successful of all was a pencil with the point of a nail sticking out of its side. If this was pressed hard into the ground, the pencil could not, of course, be picked up. And, as I said, it really was most successful. We pressed it into the wooden floor of the platform on which our head mistresses and class mistresses stood, when taking prayers and roll call.

We then watched with interest as first one mistress, and then another, tried to pick up the ridiculous pencil. We also watched one of our form with interest too – she was given to suppressing her laughter until it exploded in a terrific outburst.

I think Mam'zelle used my trick pencils more often than anyone else, but then she was always so easy to trick. That was one of her good points. Another good point was her sense of humour. After trying to write with one of my idiotic pencils she would throw it down, glare at me – and then burst into a really hearty guffaw. We loved her.

Another habit she had, which intrigued us very much, was a most dramatic one. Perhaps we had prepared our translation badly – and she would get very cross. She would bang on her desk and then, getting angrier, she would deliberately take the blackboard chalk, fling it down on the ground, and stamp on it most theatrically, till it lay crushed into white powder.

'I go back to France!' she would announce. 'Ah yes – I will leave you stupid, foolish English girls – carrot-heads . . .'

'Turnip-heads, Mam'zelle,' somebody would correct her politely, hoping to see some more chalk thrown on the floor.

'Ah-h-h-h-h! I go back to France! Tomorrow I go!' Mam'zelle would threaten.

But she didn't, until many years had gone by. She loved us and we loved her. I never forgot her, and she is one of the few people who live on in my books, real and unchanged. She was so completely herself that it was quite impossible to change her.

Do you remember the big, naughty doll in the stories of Naughty Amelia Jane? Well, she was real too. She was given to my elder daughter, Gillian, when she was a baby. How we all loved Amelia Jane, with her corkscrew hair, her big floppy limbs, and her wicked face.

Amelia Jane used to sit on my knee sometimes at mealtimes – and the things she did! She was very clever at kicking a biscuit high in the air, and she would always turn and smack the dog on the nose if he came up. The two children used to think she was really doing these things, and I can hear their squeals of laughter now.

'Put her in a story,' Gillian said. So I did, and now *you* say the same to me. 'You haven't told us a story of Amelia Jane for a long time. Please put her in a story again.'

Do you remember Claudine, in *Claudine at St. Clare's*? She was real, too. She was a Belgian girl who came for a year to my school. She was extremely naughty, very daring, not at all truthful and hated games. She was, as our form mistress said, 'as artful as a bagful of monkeys' – and yet everyone liked her. She would go to great extremes to 'pay back' a slight, or to return a kindness.

She has gone into my story exactly as she was. She popped up in the tale one day, unaltered, as completely

herself as Mam'zelle. I never knew what became of the engaging, naughty little Belgian girl. But there she is, caught in my book, exactly as she was all those years ago.

You know the Mystery books, don't you – with Fatty and Buster and Mr Goon and the rest? And you remember Inspector Jenks in those books – the big, burly, shrewd, good-tempered Inspector of Police?

Well, he is real, too. I don't think I had better tell you his real name, because he might not like it. He knows he is in all those detective stories, though!

I badly wanted an Inspector in those books, and when I met this Inspector I knew at once that he was exactly right. But would he mind being in a book, exactly as he was?

I asked him. He was as nice as he is in the books, and he didn't mind at all. In fact, if anything, he was rather tickled. He said he would be sure to tell me if I said anything wrong in the books concerning police procedure, which was very nice of him. He has each Mystery book as it comes out, and he reads them all, and enjoys them. I really feel proud about that!

He was as broad and burly, and kindly and shrewd and trustable as Inspector Jenks is in the Mysteries. You will notice that the Inspector goes up in rank in the tenth Mystery. I had to make him *Chief* Inspector there, because the real one became Chief, so the book one had to be the same! Later he became a Superintendent, so in the next Mystery Inspector Jenks becomes a Superintendent too!

Have you read the *Rockingdown Mystery* or the *Rilloby Fair Mystery*? Do you remember the dog there, Loony, the

black cocker spaniel? Well, as I have already mentioned, Loony is really my dog Laddie.

I had to put Laddie into a book. He is so beautiful, so mad, and sometimes so extraordinarily silly. Like all spaniels he is very sentimental, and looks worshippingly at everyone out of dark brown, mournful eyes.

Then there is Bill Cunningham in the Adventure series. He called himself Bill Smugs, you remember, when he first met the four children, and they were very suspicious of him. He came into the books in rather a queer way.

He is a real person too. We met him when we were staying at Swanage one year. He was very amusing, and we liked him. He knew I wrote books, and he told me that he had always wanted to be in a book. Could he be in one of mine?

'I don't think so,' I said. 'You wouldn't be interesting enough to go into a book for *children*! You haven't had any adventures, have you?'

'No,' he said. 'But I'd like them. I'd like to have been in the Secret Service, or something like that. Couldn't you possibly put me into a book and make me a Secret Service man? I really *could* have adventures then.'

'What do you mean? Put you in exactly as you are?' I said, astonished. 'With no hair on the top of your head, but just pieces round the side – and what about your name? I couldn't possibly give you your own name.'

'Look,' he said, earnestly. 'Put me in as I am, with no hair on top, and anything else you like. And call me – let me see – yes – call me Bill Smugs, will you? That is what I used to call myself as a boy.'

I began to laugh. 'I won't promise,' I said. 'But I might.'

Well, when I wrote the first Adventure book, the *Island of Adventure*, lo and behold, up popped Bill Smugs into the story. I was rather astonished. There he was, bald head and all – and in the Secret Service too! He turned out to be perfectly splendid, and I couldn't possibly have done without him in the other books.

The sad part is that we never saw 'Bill Smugs' again after that, and didn't even know his address. And, as he is a grown-up, he is not very likely to dip into the Adventure series. So he probably doesn't know to this day that he went into the Secret Service in my books, and there he is as large as life and twice as natural!

Kiki the parrot in the Adventure books is real. Are you glad to hear that? Most children are, because they do love Kiki!

Kiki belonged to an old aunt of mine. She was a wonderful parrot, intelligent, talkative and mischievous. The things she could say!

Whenever the sweep came down the road as he did in those days, crying, 'Sweeeeeep! Sweeeeeeep!' Kiki would put her head on one side and imitate him. She would often cry 'Sweeeeeep!' when the sweep wasn't in the street, and perhaps the next-door neighbour would hurry out to get the sweep – and he wouldn't be there.

My aunt had an old cleaning-woman who used to come daily. Her name was Mrs Harradine, a most unusual name. When my aunt wanted to speak to her, she would call to her from the sitting room.

'Mrs Harradine! Mrs Harradine!' And Mrs Harradine

would come trotting along the hall at once.

But when my aunt was not in the sitting-room and Kiki the parrot could hear the cleaning-woman moving about in the kitchen she would fix a wicked eye on me, and cry:

'Mrs Harradine! Mrs Harradine!' Her call sounded exactly like my aunt's, and the dear old woman came trotting along as usual. But when she put her head round the door, my aunt was not there. How peculiar!

I heard Kiki play that trick dozens of times. She could say many other things, of course, and was always imitating sounds, just as the parrot does in the Adventure books. She would often say, 'Polly's got a cold, send for the doctor.' Then she would sniff loudly and say, in my aunt's voice, 'Don't sniff! Blow your nose and wipe your feet. Shut the door. Sniff, sniff, sniff. Polly's got a cold, send for the doctor!'

She could sing 'God save the King', though she couldn't go all through the anthem. She would get muddled at times and say, 'Polly save the King,' which annoyed my aunt. Kiki knew that, and when she was in a mischievous mood she would keep on saying, 'Polly save the King, blow the King.'

'Kiki! It's "*God* save the King" and "Blow your *nose*"!' my aunt would say, shocked.

'Blow the King! God save Polly,' said the parrot one day, and that was too much for my dear old aunt. She promptly took Kiki off her perch, popped her into her big cage and put the dark cover over it, though it was still morning.

'Wipe your nose, blow your feet,' came from under the

cover. 'Blow Polly, poor Polly.'

Well, as you can see, it wasn't surprising that I found Kiki turning up in a book. I was pleased, and I know you are too.

George, who is in the Famous Five books, was also a real girl. You will remember that she is called Georgina but refuses to be called anything but George, because she so badly wants to be a boy. I think you must have felt she was real, because so often in your letters you say to me, 'George *is* real, isn't she?'

Yes, George is real, but she is grown-up now. She had a dog, of course, and though he was like Timmy (the dog in the book) in character, the artist has not drawn him quite as he looked – but then, she had never seen him, so how could she?

The real George was short-haired, freckled, sturdy, and snub-nosed. She was bold and daring, hot-tempered and loyal. She was sulky, as George is, too, but she isn't now. We grow out of those failings – or we should! Do you like George? I do.

Well, there you are, children – those are some of the characters in my books that are true and real. But to me they are no more real than any of my imaginary characters. Imaginary ones, like Mr Pink-Whistle and Mr Goon and the Saucepan Man are just as alive to me as the others. I would not really be very surprised if I turned a corner and met one of them. In fact, I'd like it very much, and I'm sure you would too!

17
My little family

Now I have almost come to the end of this book, and I hope I have told you all you want to know and answered all the questions you have asked me. Even if you have never met me, you know me very well because you have read so many books of mine, and you children always know what writers are like by the things that they put into their books.

I must say that I like lively, vigorous-minded children with lots of interests. They are so much more exciting to know than those children who haven't much interest in anything beyond the television or what they call 'messing about'.

Both Gillian and Imogen have always been bookworms. It seems to me that most children are nowadays – and I am always interested to see the way that you read.

You get hold of a new book. You race through it at top speed, so that the grown-ups think that surely you can't have understood a page. Then you read the book again, slowly – and you savour the bits you especially like. I used

to do that. It's a way of making a book really your own, reading and re-reading the pages that you like the best. Some of you read a book six, ten or even twelve times, if you like it very much. This is why children like to possess their own books, I think, unlike many grown-ups who often borrow all the time but never buy. If you possess a book, if it's your very own, you can read it as often as you like. It becomes your friend, and so do the characters in it.

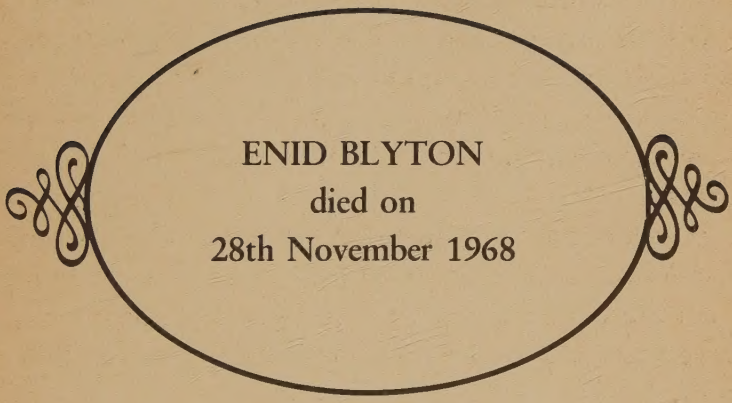
Gillian and Imogen read every book I write, usually before it goes to my publishers. Their favourites have always been your favourites. I notice that Imogen is now doing what I used to do – she reads every book she comes across.

Have I put my own two girls into my books? Yes, many, many times, at all ages! Sometimes under their own names – but more often I have unknowingly taken bits of them, and given some of their ways and characteristics to children in my books.

And then, when I correct the proofs sent to me by my publishers, I suddenly recognize a saying or a habit belonging to one of my own children, in a character in that book. Writers cannot keep reality and imagination apart for long; but perhaps that makes books all the more interesting to read.

I will end this book by saying thank you to you for all the letters you have written to me, and the loving messages you have sent – messages that come from every corner of the world. You are my special friends – and I am very proud and happy to be yours.

So – goodbye for now – and good luck.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